# Preschools play with power

constructing the child, the teacher and the preschool in two Polish childcare institutions

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## Constructing the Child, the Teacher and the Preschool in Two Polish Childcare Institutions

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Katarzyna Gawlicz
*Preschools Play with Power.*
*Constructing the Child, the Teacher and the Preschool in Two Polish Childcare Institutions*

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As soon as one can no longer think things
as one formerly thought them,
transformation becomes both very urgent,
very difficult and quite possible.

(Foucault, 1988b: 155)

# Foreword

This PhD dissertation is a contribution to the formation of a new interdisciplinary research area. Research in lifelong learning is in a certain sense a historically necessary continuation of *pedagogical* research. As an area of research, however, lifelong learning has a broader scope. The research perspective comprises learning through the whole course of life in formal education, everyday life, work life, family life, civil society, etc. Thus research in lifelong learning calls for an interdisciplinary approach to learning as a subjective activity in a social context.

The Graduate School in Lifelong Learning will contribute to the development of these areas of research by training skilled researchers who realize the specific academic potential of this interdisciplinary and problem-oriented approach.

A PhD dissertation marks the end of an academic apprenticeship. It proves that the author has been "conducting an independent research project under supervision" as stated in the "Ministerial Order on the PhD Course of Study and on the PhD Degree". It is the culmination of the process that is published here. PhD dissertations are however also part of the development and forming of a new area of research. This preface will briefly present the Graduate School and the research environment in which the PhD dissertation is written.

The Graduate School in Lifelong Learning was established in 1999 with support from the Danish Research Academy (now Danish Research Training Council). The Graduate School is a continuation of the research-training programme in education dating back to the early nineties. Since the PhD-programme at the Department of Educational Studies was established some 55 students have achieved the PhD degree. Presently some fifty students are enrolled. The Graduate School has an annual enrolment of approximately 10 new doctoral students. It is an international research training programme. Academic every day life comprises frequent visits by international guest professors and visits by foreign PhD students. Both students and supervisors are engaged in international research networks. Furthermore agreements are established on cooperation with leading research groups across the world.

The Graduate School draws upon theoretical and methodological inspiration from traditions within the art and humanities as well as the social sciences. Graduate School training addresses issues traditionally ignored by discipline-oriented research and professional knowledge. It particularly

focuses on learning as the subjective mediation of objective, societal and cultural processes. Research in Lifelong Learning encompasses a variety of subjects and is equally broad in the perspectives it takes. The topics of the PhD dissertations are often quite far from what is usually associated with pedagogy, but help to co-establish an emerging critical and historically located important area of research. This often demands theoretical and methodological innovation. At the same time the programme aims to establish connections between existing traditions in pedagogical research and associated disciplines. Methodologically the graduate school concentrates on qualitative methods and interpretive methodology. Within a wide scope each project may choose and adapt quite different methods to the specific research problem.

Katarzyna Gawlicz has in her dissertation "Preschool Play with Power. Constructing the Child, the Teacher and the Preschool in two Polish Childcare Institutions" made a landmark contribution to research into children's institutional everyday life. Contextualising her research in the specific Polish situation makes it a highly needed piece of research about pedagogical practices in preschool settings in Poland. But it is at the same time a contribution of international interest for everyone dealing with research and practical involvement in children's everyday life in early childhood education. Through the ethnographic inspired field work in two different preschool settings Katarzyna Gawlicz establishes a very thorough and critical discussion on how children's everyday life is organised and structured by the professionals. In analyzing her extensive empirical data she shows how the child-adult relations are organised around a hierarchical generational order, based on technologies of power. By involving Foucauldian and poststructuralist theory and concepts Katarzyna Gawlicz manages to find relevant and interesting ways of understanding the seemingly insignificant day to day pedagogical practices as not 'innocent', neutral or obvious at all. Rather they must be understood as part of specific regimes of truth, of contributions to constructing and reconstructing hierarchical power structures, of establishing certain types of normalization, and of expressing the demands for the proper preschooler. Apart from offering a vivid and enlightening insight into the area of preschooling in a specific Polish context, the dissertation is recommended as a very good read for anyone with an interest in knowing more about what is happening on a daily basis in children's institutional settings. Although national and local differences are obvious, the analyses in this dissertation should stimulate critical discussions concerning children's everyday life and the normalization practices this involves in institutional contexts across these differences.

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I started working on this project in the Department of Sociology at the University of Wrocław, Poland. I am grateful to my late supervisor, Prof. Wojciech Sitek, for his support, and to the University of Wrocław for their financial assistance that enabled me to carry out my fieldwork. A major part of this dissertation came into being when I was a guest student at the Graduate School in Lifelong Learning at the Roskilde University Center, and I thank everyone who made my visits possible and helped me in any way. I would particularly like to thank Jan Kampmann for guiding me through all the steps of my research project, from conceptualizing it to writing final drafts of the dissertation. A big thank you goes to the people who made my stay in Denmark easier: Signe Mette Jensen, Karin Kjølby, Mikael Meldstad, Propel and Frank Wagner.

I discussed my research project and various drafts of what would become this dissertation with numerous people. I appreciate the insights I received from participants of workshops, study groups and conferences where I presented my work. Summer schools at the Graduate School in Lifelong Learning proved especially helpful. Thanks to all the participants and professors who read my papers and commented on them. I would also like to thank Charlotte Palludan, Jimmy Krab, Dorit Gaarskjær and other members of the ConCrit group on democratic kindergartens for their careful reading of a number of my draft chapters and for inspiring discussions on childcare, as well as Linda Lundgaard Andersen, Eva Gulløv, Agnieszka Tkaczyńska, Marcin Starnawski, Steen Baagøe Nielsen, Ewa Charkiewicz and Helga Kelle for their comments and suggestions. I also thank Vibeke Lihn for preparing this dissertation for publication.

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# Introduction

> If we are really to become interested in children's emotional experiences, rather than in trying to manage them or make uncomfortable emotions disappear, then we have to engage with them, and with our own responses to them.
>
> (Burman 2008: 277)

Children's emotions that I witnessed and that spurred my own emotions gave rise to this dissertation. It grew out of long months I spent in two Polish preschools. By the end of this process I was left with hundreds of pages of fieldnotes and images impressed deep in my mind. Some of these images still make me smile inside. There is an image of a girl happily running across a playground in a colorful poncho waving in the wind. Or of a group of girls picking up bugs from a wall and then, with the bugs hidden in their fists, chasing boys who pretended to be terrified by the little insects. Or children climbing up jungle gyms, triumphant about getting so high up. However, other images make me uneasy. I can still picture a little girl with black teeth damaged by decay, telling me that her mom likes drinking alcohol. And a small, blond-haired boy in a blue sweater with sleeves that were too long, carried by a teacher along with a chair he was sitting on, when he did not want to move. Or another boy who tries to put on his slippers in a pitch-dark corridor after a furious teacher pushed him out of a cloakroom where he and other children took too much time changing. All these incidents were highly emotionally charged, and they all left me with the urge to act.

This dissertation is my response to this urge. Situations such as those just mentioned, still vividly present in my mind, prompted me to look closer at the position of children in a preschool and their relationships with teachers. In this dissertation, situated in the framework of the so-called new sociology of childhood, I examine the preschool as a site of a power operation that leads to the development of a hierarchical generational order. I demonstrate how structures of dominance and subordination, so prevalent in Polish society, are produced in daily practice of early childhood educational institutions. I show how adults try to establish their dominant position and how children respond to it with a range of resistance techniques. I also analyze the constructions of a child, a teacher and a preschool, both produced through preschool practices and informing them. While problems explored in the dissertation will later be

discussed in more detail, I would like to first outline the process that led me to developing such research.

## Origin and development of the project

My project shared a common fate of ethnographic research: it underwent a serious transformation during the course of my fieldwork. My initial interest was in processes of gender construction in childcare settings. In 2002 I carried out a short, ethnographically inspired research project on preschool children doing gender. My PhD project was originally designed as its continuation and development through a prolonged comparative study. With this intention I established contacts with two preschools in Wrocław, one of the biggest Polish cities in the Lower Silesia region, and in late 2004 I began my research. The preschools differed significantly from each other. One was located in one of the most neglected districts in the city, and many children enrolled there were raised in poor, working class, often single-parent families. I call it Preschool A. The other place, Preschool B, was situated in a prestigious neighborhood and attended by children of well-educated academics, company owners or professionals.

Apart from a single visit in Preschool A, I spent the first few weeks of my fieldwork in Preschool B. I was concerned with the ways in which children positioned themselves as girls or boys and how adults helped them construct themselves in such a way. When I look back at my fieldnotes from the first weeks, I can notice a clear focus on gender and children. Later, I moved to Preschool A and suddenly *girls* and *boys* were pushed to the background and teachers became much more visible. In my fieldnotes, rather than describing how children positioned themselves as gendered preschoolers, I started writing more and more about interactions between children and adults. The more time I spent in Preschool A, the more preoccupied I became with child-teacher relations. I began to contemplate the much larger visibility of teachers in Preschool A compared to Preschool B. My impression was that the teachers were there all the time, constantly telling the kids what to do and how to do it. However, the teachers were present in ways that soon started troubling me. I witnessed shouting at children, physically directing their bodies or punishing them, sometimes physically, for even the smallest infractions. I was not prepared for such an experience. I knew of violence against children, but it was not a part of my milieu. I had lived convinced of the need to respect

children, care for them and respond to their needs. Finding myself in a place where children could be shouted at for nearly anything, force-fed when they did not want to eat or violently dragged if they refused to move voluntarily, I was forced to try to comprehend a whole range of actions I was entirely unaccustomed to. My early fieldnotes are inundated with comments on teachers shouting at children, violence or aggression, and a question "Why is this happening?" recurs. At the same time, I was astonished by the children's apparent lack of response to what I perceived as the teachers' violence. Asked why the teachers shouted at them, the children would say: Because we misbehave, defining a host of actions, including disliking beans, as misbehavior. My impression was that the children took it for granted that the teachers shouted at them or made them do things. They seemed entirely used to it.

My bewilderment was intensified by a striking difference between the manner in which each of the two preschools worked. Every time I went to Preschool B, I had a sense of being in a place where everyone felt good: the teachers who liked their job, the children who, while still getting into conflicts and arguments, enjoyed coming to the preschool. It was a place where hearing an adult shout was rare and where the children seemed not to fight so much. I soon realized that switching to Preschool B after a few weeks of fieldwork in Preschool A was a time of emotional rest for me. Like the kids and staff, I also liked being there. I did not have the sense of emotional burden that accompanied me constantly in Preschool A. I felt much more comfortable in Preschool B. This could result from the fact that the teaching practices employed there were much more in line with what I perceived as proper childcare than those followed in the other preschool. I was astonished by some of the Preschool A teachers' practices and I often considered them detrimental to the children. I had the feeling that I should do something, and at the same time I could not sense what exactly this would be. I did not even feel comfortable enough to directly confront the teachers about their way of acting until very late in the project. As a consequence, I never developed close relationships with them (as opposed to my relationships with Preschool B teachers) and I often had the feeling of being an intruder in the group. Moreover, I strongly identified with the children (although as the time went on, I grew more and more aware of the reasons for the teachers' actions and I could sympathize with them more) and the experience of the adults' outright dominance was difficult for me to handle emotionally. On a few occasions, I had to leave the preschool because I could no longer bear what I was

observing. My vehement disagreement with the manner in which adults treated children and positioned them forced me to try to understand what was actually happening in the preschool and why, and rendered my original interest in practices of doing gender rather trivial. Providing an account of the adults' dominance over children and attempting to explain it seemed much more meaningful and urgent.

The differences between the two preschools also called for attention. Even though in both preschools the teachers' and children's positions were clearly defined and differentiated, children in Preschool B had visibly more autonomy than those in Preschool A. They also appeared to be respected more than their Preschool A counterparts, and incidents of shouting at them or forcefully moving them from one place to another were fairly infrequent. Surprisingly, this resonated a lot with the results of Bowles and Gintis' (1976) analysis of educational practices in the USA in the 1960s. As they observed, "predominantly working-class schools tend to emphasize behavioral control and rule-following, while schools in well-to-do suburbs employ relatively open systems that favor greater student participation, less direct supervision, more student electives, and, in general, a value system stressing internalized standards of control" (*ibid.*: 132). I started wondering about the impact of the children's class background on the differing educational practices in the two institutions. In the course of my research, I realized that the methodological design of my project would not enable me to draw any valid conclusions concerning the relation between socioeconomic factors and teaching practices. I eventually forwent the attempts to indicate any correlations, but I still paid attention to the differences between the two places.

## The research project in the context of childhood research and the situation of children in Poland

My study, as I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 2, can be situated in the framework of the so-called new sociology of childhood. Characteristic of it is the perception of childhood as worth researching for its own sake, and not only as a preparatory stage for adulthood. On the methodological plane, it involves an effort to develop such research methods that would facilitate access to "children's perspective," i.e., children's own views on a given issue, rather than the adults' opinions about what children may think. Although Polish scholarship on childhood is significant, few studies have been

concerned with (young) children's own experience of their situation. A review of the existing literature reveals that scholars have investigated children's conditions under changing social and cultural circumstances, in particular issues such as child poverty, the impact of changes in the family structure on children, violence against children or children and new media. Rarely did they, however, venture to explore what such changes mean to children themselves, concentrating instead on adults' perception of them. Single studies problematize a child's marginalized position in the society or adopt the framework of children's rights (e.g. Jacyno, Sulżycka 1999).

A similar tendency can be observed in the field of educational research. A lot of attention has been paid to educational inequalities and the role of school (since the majority of educational research concentrates on levels higher than preschool) in reinforcing the underprivileged position of children from families with lower socioeconomic status, from rural areas or, to a lesser extent, girls. There has been a strong focus on studies that analyze the organization of educational institutions, including preschools, from the perspective of teachers or administrative bodies. A lot of space has been given to issues such as teaching methods or managing specific difficulties (e.g. coping with "problem" children). Again, rarely have the studies been carried out from the child's perspective or in a manner that would entail including children as subjects, e.g. through ethnographic approaches (but see Zwiernik 2006). Research on hidden curriculum (e.g. Siarkiewicz 2000) or symbolic violence (Falkiewicz-Szult 2007), while indirectly uncovering unknown aspects of children's experiences, did not move to actually inquire about their perceptions of their lives in educational institutions. Institutional analyses of preschool work, carried out by local departments of education for the purpose of evaluation, are concerned with a preschool's attainment of predefined targets and provide very little insight into children's and adults' daily functioning. In this context my research, which pays attention to details of everyday life in preschools by looking at interactions between children and adults, as much as possible doing so from a child's perspective, may contribute to the production of new, alternative knowledge of the field.

What I discovered and documented in the course of my research project was the scope and diversity of adults' dominance over children. While violence against children remains a central topic both in scholarly work on children and in popular writing, it tends to be understood in a narrow sense as inflicting harm (physical or emotional) on children by incompetent, sometimes deviant, adults, usually parents. As I will demonstrate in Chapter 1, violence

against children remains a significant problem in Poland. Not prohibited directly and often not recognized as violence, it is a daily experience of many children, including those in my research. Corporal punishment functions as a legitimate form of disciplining, although there have recently been attempts to ban it. The attempts to forbid the use of physical force toward children, the discussion instigated by these initiatives, as well as academic and popular writing on the subject, are of utmost importance. However, what remains largely overlooked is, first, a more general issue of adults' power and control over children, and second, adult-child relations in social institutions other than the family. Concentrating mostly on physical violence, the debates fail to recognize the multiple ways in which adults dominate children, impose their will on them and prevent them from having a say. The hierarchical character of child-adult relations in Polish culture, with child abuse being only its most striking reflection, manifests itself in multiple ways, from sayings such as "Children and fish have no voice" or "Children are the best when they are asleep" to a linguistic convention of addressing adults as Ms or Mr and children by their first names. Yet, the link between such symbolic indicators of children's low social status and physical violence against them is rarely made. Moreover, perhaps due to the failure to recognize the myriad ways of subjugating children and depriving them of their rights, or, possibly, due to the perception of children's subordination to adults as natural and acceptable, very little attention is paid to the children's experience of institutions such as preschools or schools. With my research, I attempt to contribute both to the discussion on violence against children by indicating some of its deeper, more systemic dimensions (which often fail to be recognized as violence), and to knowledge about children's everyday life in one of the early education institutions.

## Research problems and interests

My conviction that the most explicit forms of violence against children are only symptoms of broader underlying tendencies had specific consequences for my research approach. Rather than concentrating on individual cases of violence, I decided to try to investigate the more general structure of which they were a part. The notion of power relations seemed to offer such a framework. Foucault's theory of power provides particularly useful explanatory tools here. It allows not only for discussing the issue of the

physical abuse of children, but also for investigating more fundamental processes of constituting children as dependent, subordinate or as a minority group. It makes it possible to look at the preschool institution as a place where children are constructed as specific subjects who respond to the processes of their subjection in multiple ways. Preschools emerge as a place of constant games of power in whose course some more or less stable hierarchical structures – based on age and/or position (adults/teachers vs. children, younger vs. older children) or gender (girls vs. boys) are developed. My focus was on identifying those structures and practices that bring them to life.

Formulation of the problem in terms of the Foucault-inspired notion of the relations of power is useful for a number of other reasons as well. First, it helps to see children as actively involved in the play of power, rather than mere victims of adults' violence. Children do not simply accept their subordinate position, but actively position themselves – through resistance, acquiescence, or by reenacting hierarchical structures in their interactions with their peers. Second, it opens up a way to understand or explain the adults' behavior by situating it in a discursive context. Teachers function within specific regimes of truth. They hold certain beliefs about the position of the child and the adult/teacher, the role of the preschool or appropriate teaching methods. They know how to act in order to be recognized as respected, competent teachers and adults. One of the main discursive frameworks that direct teachers' work is the generational order with specific positions inscribed in it. While reestablished in the course of the teachers' interactions with children, it also informs their actions. However, the discursive frameworks that organize childcare may change, and I suggest that they are changing at the moment in Poland. Along with it, changes in the conceptions of a child, the understandings of proper conduct toward children or of the teacher's (and adult's) role take place. Teachers have to deal with new circumstances and requirements, while not always being prepared for it.

This conceptualization can be translated into the following research problems that structured my fieldwork and the analysis:

1. How does power operate in preschools? What structures are established as a result of its operation? What techniques of power are put in practice?
2. What conceptions of the child inform the teachers' practices? What models of a proper preschooler are produced as the result of power operation in the teachers' daily practice? What subject positions are

developed for adults and children? How do children respond to these positions?

3. How do structural and discursive factors (the location of a preschool, the background of children attending it, teachers' understanding of their roles) influence power relations in a preschool and structures that are established in the process?
4. Can preschools characterized by such a way of power operation function as democratic institutions?

## Construction of the thesis

The thesis is an analysis of different dimensions of power operation in the two preschools studied. I begin with an exploration of child-adult relations and focus on practices whereby teachers' and children's positions in the generational order of the preschool were established. I also identify the specific construction of the child/the preschooler both developed in the process of positioning and informing it as a discursive resource. I then turn to the children's responses to the adults' dominance, and their views on preschool life. Finally, I discuss the teachers' opinions on the organization of institutionalized childcare and their work as teachers.

Chapter 1 introduces the research context. I discuss recent socioeconomic changes in Poland and their impact on the population at large and children in particular. I concentrate specifically on childcare – situating its present-day conditions against the background of childcare in past decades – and violence against children. Furthermore, I discuss the organization of preschool education in Poland and I give background information concerning the two institutions included in my research. Some of the issues, in particular those having to do with obstacles and challenges that teachers experience in the course of their work, emerge again in the last chapter.

Chapter 2 details the conceptual framework of the project. In the first part I discuss theoretical inspirations for my research and the analysis of my findings: the new sociology of childhood and, in particular, its deconstructive strand that draws on the work of Michel Foucault that also provides the main conceptual framework for my research, as well as a number of other theories I draw on to a lesser extent. The second part are methodological considerations. I deal briefly with the specificity of research with children and examine the issue of taking multiple perspectives (child's, researcher's and teacher's) in

more detail. In particular I reflect on the meaning and implications of the child's perspective. Next, I turn to the discussion of the research methods employed in the course of my research as a consequence of the various perspectives taken. Finally, I analyze my position as a researcher and major ethical challenges related to the project.

Chapter 3 is a foray into the main, analytical, part of the dissertation. It is a case study of a Preschool A boy named Harcon. Considered the most misbehaved and difficult child in the group, he constantly attracted the teachers' attention. As a result, his case – although rather extreme – was a very explicit illustration of normalization practices in the preschool. In Chapter 3, I explore the meaning of his case for the development of my research focus and discuss the ways in which he was constructed as a "misfit."

Themes introduced in Chapter 3 are further developed in Chapter 4, where I examine the construction of a proper preschooler. Education is about normalization, and, as I will demonstrate, both institutions develop their own models of a "normal" preschool child. In the first part, I examine the construction of a proper preschooler based on the preschools' documents and the teachers' discourse on children. The second part draws on the teachers' everyday practices through which they produce a model child. Foucault's notions of pastoral power and governmentality are used as explanatory tools to show how features such as obedience, the ability to follow regulations as well as to control oneself and to reflect on one's own development are important elements of the teachers' construction of a proper preschool child. Finally, I analyze the construction of the preschooler as a gendered being.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 are all concerned with different dimensions of child-teacher relations. Chapter 5, drawing on the notions of positioning and generationing, is an analysis of different positions that teachers and children take. While these positions are many and flexible, and have different consequences for child-adult relations, they all tend to be embedded in the generational order of the preschool. Chapter 6 and 7 deal with the ways in which the generational order is established. In Chapter 6 I look at disciplinary technologies that operate to produce these positions, and in Chapter 7 I analyze the processes of structuring everyday preschool life as a means of developing the generational order. The overriding argument in both chapters is that through the use of disciplinary technologies and control over preschool reality, teachers work to establish a generational order in which they occupy dominant positions, while children are constituted as a minority status group. Also, pointing to different forms the disciplinary technologies take in each

place, I demonstrate how the generational order, and children's status in it, changes.

In Chapter 8, the focus is changed slightly as I concentrate more specifically on children's responses to adults' dominance. In the first part of the chapter I discuss a range of resistance techniques that children employ. The second part looks at ways in which children reenact the hierarchical order in their own peer groups, and how dominance-subordination structures based on age, gender and preschool membership develop.

Chapter 9 examines children's views on their life in the preschool: what they liked and disliked about it, and what they would like to see changed. The chapter closes with a discussion of the ambiguities of the notion of responding to children's needs and the issue as to who the preschool is for and to whom it belongs.

Chapter 10 provides the teachers' perspective on the functioning of the preschool and their own work, including the primary difficulties they had to face. I discuss the material and structural organization of preschool education and the specific institutions, as well as changes in the generational order, the conception of the child, and expectations of the teachers that posed additional challenges they had to respond to.

## Why such a project?

> Policy and practice need to engage with intellectual work which 'questions over and over again what is postulated as self-evident, to disturb people's mental habits, the way they do and think things, to dissipate what is familiar and accepted, to reexamine rules and institutions'.
>
> (Moss e*t al.* 2000: 251, quoting Foucault 1988b: 265)

My research grew from my concern with the marginalized social status of children. One could claim that social, political and cultural attention is increasingly being centered on children in Poland. From art, educational and entertainment projects, to school system reforms carried out in the name of responding to children's needs, to marketing campaigns targeted at children – all these initiatives seem to testify to children's elevated standing in public life. Yet it could also be argued that there is little interest in actually listening to their voices and taking their views seriously, i.e., acting on them. An Office of Children's Ombudsman exists, however, it has not developed virtually any

instruments that would enable children to communicate their opinions. Children are not consulted in the process of drafting new legislation or implementing reforms that concern them. The very fact that corporal punishment has not yet been forbidden while there still exists a legally binding notion of parental power[1] raises serious doubts as to the validity of the decision-makers' claims of acting in children's best interest. The picture becomes even more complex when one takes such factors into consideration as the neglect of children by overworked or stressed parents or, at the other extreme, a pressure to invest in children by burdening them with a host of activities.

This study is an attempt to create a space where children could be heard. I bring to light dimensions of their experiences that tend to be relatively hidden and unknown. I investigate everyday practices through which the marginalized position of children (of, to use Mayall's (2002) term, their minority group status) is produced. In my account, children's views – as much as it is possible to access them (see Chapter 1) – or my interpretation of their condition, are much more visible than those of the adults. This is probably an inevitable consequence of a decision to focus on the children's experience, yet I accept the possible criticism that I fail to draw a complete picture and do justice to the teachers. What I can argue to my defense is that – besides the conviction that a full picture is never possible to arrive at – generally speaking, teachers are represented and have some means of making their voice heard. Teachers' trade unions, which are vocal and cover a large percentage of the workforce in the education sector, are quite successful at bringing the difficult conditions of their work and problems they face in their everyday school lives to the public attention[2]. Incidents of teachers' abuses by students are also widely publicized. Children, in turn, do not have access to any of the communication channels open to adults/teachers. As my research shows, accustomed to their marginalized position they are often not even able to

1 Attempts to substitute it with the notion of parental care so far have been unsuccessful.

2 This, obviously, does not mean that teachers are always met with responses they would like to hear, and that their voices are taken into consideration. One could argue that teachers as a occupational category are socially marginalized and underprivileged (see Silver's (2003: 113-119) analysis of teachers as workers whose work is commodified in the globalized economy). Moreover, in the Polish context, teachers' trade unions are often denounced and discredited. While I do point to the social-structural context of the teachers' work as a factor that influences their actions, any in-depth analysis of it is beyond the scope of this project.

question it. One could argue therefore that studies that bring children's experiences to the fore, even at the expense of the teachers' perspectives, have been long overdue.

This approach also means that my study can be read as an attempt to reposition children: from those who are primarily seen as entirely subordinate to and dependent on adults to those whose dignity is acknowledged. It can be interpreted as an argument for respecting children, rather than merely teaching them the need to respect others. Teaching mutual respect when it is not lived is difficult if not bound to fail altogether. If children are to be able to develop close, friendly relationships with others and be kind, tolerant and open-minded – as some of the foundational documents in preschool education state – such values need to be part of their everyday experience.

Finally, an important clarification needs to be made. My analysis is quite critical of some of the practices that took place in the two preschools studied, and, as other research shows, are rather typical of Polish early childcare institutions in general. However, to interpret it as an argument against preschool education as such would be entirely against my intentions. Numerous studies point to multiple benefits of preschool attendance for children, and my observations leave no doubt that going to preschool can be genuinely enjoyable for children. The issue therefore is not whether or not preschool education should be promoted; it is what kind of preschool education should be. Perhaps the question could be phrased even more broadly as to what shape child-adult relationships should take so that children function as respectable human beings rather than as adults' possessions. The question therefore concerns the relations of power in which adults and children are entangled. Foucault maintains that societies without power relations cannot exist, yet the specific forms that power relations take are not inevitable. Different ways in which adults relate to children – on the basis of mutual respect, trust and care – can be imagined. In fact, in many places they are already put in practice. My study itself demonstrates that different forms of child-adult relationships are possible in preschools. In the most general sense, then, this study can be interpreted as an attempt to provoke reconsideration of the most widespread ways in which adults and children relate to each other and in which institutions of early childhood education and care are organized, and an attempt to construct a background on which other ways of child-adult relations can be conceived.

# 1. The research context: children and preschools in Poland

This chapter outlines the political, economic and social context in which Polish preschools function. I begin with the political and economic transition that has taken place in Poland, and its ramifications for the population at large and children in particular. I concentrate on some demographic trends, access to childcare services and violence against children. In the second part of the chapter I discuss childcare services, with a focus on preschools, in more detail. Included are observations about childcare services in the post-WWII period and changes that ensued from the collapse of state socialism in Poland. I also describe the present organization and management of the preschool system. In the final section I focus on the preschools where I carried out my research. Overall, through the analysis of legal regulations, statistical data and popular discourses on preschools, preschool teachers and children, I outline the general context in which preschools operated and highlight main challenges that the teachers had to take up, which may have influenced their actions.

## Post-transition Poland: socioeconomic changes

In the late 1980s, Poland, along with a number of other Eastern European countries, entered a period of transition from state socialism toward market economy and a capitalist model of society. Bloch and Blessing (2000) argue that the transition processes that took place in the Eastern European countries entailed a discursive change: "the discourses of 'freedom', 'autonomy', 'individualism' and 'democracy' were linked with the concepts that competition was good, open markets were needed, efficient markets were important even at the cost of social provisions for citizens" (*ibid.*: 65). The social costs of the transition indeed proved high. The unemployment rate increased significantly: from 6.5 percent in 1990 to 19.7 percent in 2002 (IPiSS n.d. a). In the following years it dropped to 14.8 percent in 2006 and 11.4 percent in 2008 (GUS 2008a: 153). The number of people experiencing

poverty also rose. The percentage of households living below the social and subsistence minimum increased[3]. Between 1994 and 2001 the percentage of households living below the social minimum level rose from 47.9 percent to 57 percent, while the percentage of those living below the subsistence minimum changed from 6.4 percent in 1994 to 11.7 in 2003 (IPiSS n.d. b). In terms of the relative poverty rate (below 60 percent of median income for a given country), Poland had one of the highest rates in the European Union: 21 percent, as compared to 16 percent for the EU (GUS 2007a) in 2004.

Impoverishment is particularly harsh in single-parent families and those with more than three children. A study on a household's ways of securing livelihood in an industrial neighborhood in one of the largest Polish cities of Kraków demonstrated that as many as 60 percent of single-parent households lived on an income below 60 percent of the income median (which is considered at risk of poverty). Moreover, the percentage of families without children and with an income below 60 percent of the median was significantly lower than families with children (Stenning *et al.* n.d.). On a more general level, in 2007, 25 percent of families with four or more children, 10.5 percent of families with three children, and 7 percent of single-parent families lived below the subsistence level (GUS 2008c).

These phenomena have had a direct impact on children whose families often struggle with the effects of the economic and political transition. In the next section I will discuss this issue more detail, including a reflection on a possible link between socioeconomic changes and violence against children.

## Impact of the transition process on children – demographic data

Changes that took place as a result of the 1989 systemic transition affected children. The most easily noticeable feature is the shrinking of the population of children. The number of children aged 0-17 dropped from 11,352,000 in 1989 to 7,864,000 in 2005, while the population of children aged 0-4 decreased from 3,145,000 in 1989 to 1,780,600 in 2004 (UNICEF 2007: 30-

3 Social minimum is defined as a measure that indicates a generally low level of satisfying needs, but still sufficient for ensuring one's biological reproduction and maintaining social relationships. The subsistence (or biological) minimum refers to a level of satisfying needs below which one's biological survival and psychophysical development are endangered (Kurowski 2002).

31). Fertility rate, calculated as the number of live births per woman aged 15 to 49 changed from 2.05 in 1989 to 1.24 in 2005, and is one of the lowest in the Central-Eastern Europe (*ibid.*: 32).

There has been a noticeable improvement of some indicators of children's well-being, most importantly the infant mortality rate which dropped from 19.1 in 1989 to 6.4 in 2005 and the under 5 mortality rate which changed from 22 in 1989 to 7.5 in 2005 (calculated per 1,000 live births; UNICEF 2007: 36). Despite the improvement, both figures remain relatively high in comparison with neighboring countries. Other indicators are much more negative. As I will discuss in more detail in a later section, recorded violence against children by family members increased, as did the rate of children in residential care: from 554 in 1989 to 709.1 in 2005 (UNICEF 2007: 48) and the rate of children in the care of foster families: from 337.9 in 1989 to 631.6 in 2005, which is the highest figure in Central European countries (both per 100,000 population aged 0-17; UNICEF 2007: 49). Accompanying the general impoverishment of large sectors of society, the risk of child poverty increases as well. Poland has the highest percentage of households with children aged 0 to 5 living at the risk of poverty threshold (defined as 60 percent of the median value of disposable income): 25 percent compared to the European average of 17.2 percent (Euridyce 2009: 57; figures for 2005). Children are also over-represented among the poor: in 2001 there were 24.1 percent of children aged 0 to 17 in the entire population and 43.9 percent in the poor population (Warzywoda-Kruszyńska, Grotowska-Leder 2002: 30). As Tarkowska's (2005) research findings indicate, children living in poverty experience a number of disadvantageous phenomena. Their everyday needs are not adequately satisfied (including proper food supply, clothing, medication or space to play or study), they have limited educational opportunities (which in part results from the fact that schools are not prepared to work with poor children and strengthen inequalities rather than reducing them) and are expected to work more than their peers from more economically privileged families, both for pay and doing housework (which concerns in particular eldest daughters in families with four or more children), at the expense of leisure or study time. One of the most alarming phenomena is the tendency to inherit poverty. As a result of a set of financial, cultural and psychological reasons, as well as inadequate, short-term rather than long-term, aid given to economically disadvantaged people, children living in poor families, especially in rural areas, tend to become poor adults (Tarkowska

2005: 246). Inadequate childcare provision, including the lack of proper services, plays its role in the process.

## Childcare services

Children's access to institutionalized childcare services, most importantly – in this context – to preschools, varies vastly depending on the geographic location, and is rather limited. Preschools cover children aged 3 to 6[4], and preschool attendance is optional for most children. At the time of my research only six-year-old children were required to participate in it as a form of school preparation[5]. The obligatory "grade 0" education is provided both by preschools and schools. While the introduction of the obligatory preschool education for six-year-olds was motivated by the need to counteract inequality and increase opportunities for children from underprivileged families, arguments have been voiced concerning the inefficiency of the present system of two types of school preparation. Although both preschools and school-based grade 0 groups cover the same basic curriculum, school children are still disadvantaged inasmuch as they are not provided with extracurricular activities that preschool children have access to and spend only 5 hours a day at school (as opposed to the average 7 to 8 hours that preschool grade 0 children do). Moreover, almost half of the population of the six-year-olds begin their education only then and get enrolled in a school-based grade 0 group (Herbst n.d.). Not only do they spend fewer hours a day in a preschool, but also during a shorter time span. Since school-based grade 0 education is free of charge, it is mostly poorer families that decide to enroll their children there. As a result, disparities between children with different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds are retained.

Poland has the lowest preschool enrollment rate for children aged 4 and 5 in the European Union (Eurydice 2009: 65). Taking into consideration the

4 This is currently changing with lowering the obligatory school age to six. Beginning with the school year 2009/2010, six-year-olds will be gradually covered by school education.

5 Obligatory preschool education for six-year-old children was introduced in 2004. Before that year, children of that age had the right to participate in preschool education. This, however, did not place an immediate obligation on municipalities to ensure places for all children. Nonetheless, in the school year 2003/2004 97.7 percent of six-year-olds were enrolled in preschools or school-based 0 grade groups. In the year 2004/2005, when preschool education became obligatory for this age group, the percentage rose insignificantly, to 98.1 percent (Kienig 2006: 65).

period when I carried out my research, in the school year 2005/2006 only 55.6 percent of children ages 3 to 6 attended preschool. There were significant differences between participation rates in urban and rural areas: 70.4 percent and 37.2 percent respectively. These figures, however, do not reflect the actual access to preschool given the obligatory enrollment of six-year-olds. The enrollment rate for children aged 3 to 5 is much lower, and in 2005/2006 reached only 41 percent (GUS 2006). The figures for the school year 2006/2007 are not much higher. The enrollment rate for children aged 3 to 6 was 58.4 percent, with 73.8 percent enrollment rate in cities and 39 percent in the rural areas. The figure for children aged 3 to 5 was 44.6 percent (GUS 2007b).

Preschool enrollment rates differ significantly for different age groups. For instance, in the year 2006/2007 only 33 percent of three-year-olds, 44 percent of four-year-olds, 56 percent of five-year-olds and 97 percent of six-year-olds attended preschool. The figures for Wrocław were somewhat higher and, for example, in 2005/2006 46 percent of three-year-olds, 57 percent of four-year-olds, 67 percent of five-year-olds and 61 percent of six-year-olds[6] were enrolled in preschools. On average, 69 percent and 69.5 percent of preschool age children in Wrocław attended preschool in 2005/2006 and 2006/2007 respectively. Nevertheless, a significant percentage of children are not covered by preschool education. Moreover, the municipality takes very few measures to increase preschool participation. Among the few are plans to exempt families enrolling their second child in the preschool from fees, and to open new preschools (already partly executed) in newly developed and highly populated districts where the demand for them is the greatest. These steps are, however, inadequate, and still a large percent of preschool-age children are prevented from going to preschool.

## Violence against children

One of the main themes of this thesis is violence experienced by children. Violence against children, which seems to be a permanent feature of Polish culture[7], has recently become a focus of a number of consciousness-raising

6 Remaining children of that age were ensured places in school-based grade 0 groups.

7 UNICEF reports on violence against children indicate that corporal punishment of children is a global phenomenon, observable in both developed and developing countries, and legally permitted in many countries (UNICEF 1997, UNICEF 2005).

campaigns organized by non-governmental organizations and academic institutions, with the support of governmental agencies. Campaigns such as "Childhood without Abuse," "See – Hear – Say," "I love. I don't beat" or "I love. I react," aimed at publicizing the issue of violence against children and inducing people to react to incidents of child abuse, have instigated debates about issues such as adults' (mostly parents') right to raise children in ways they consider appropriate, and the legitimacy of corporal punishment. The debates were spurred by a number of widely reported incidents of infants' or children's deaths as a result of beating, which led to attempts to introduce regulations that explicitly forbid beating children.

The existing regulations are unclear and open to diverse interpretations. Article 40 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland provides that no one can be subjected to torture or cruel, humiliating treatment, and that corporal punishment is prohibited. This prohibition, however, tends to be interpreted as concerning administering corporal punishment as the state's penalty, rather than adults' actions directed at children (Konarska-Wrzosek 2003: 3). The penal code stipulates regulations that allow for the prosecution of individuals who inflict injury or hit another person, however, these crimes can only be prosecuted if requested by the victim, unless the injury is severe. As such, these regulations do not constitute an effective measure for protecting children against violence inflicted by adults. At the same time, however, anyone suspecting the occurrence of violence against a child is obliged to notify the proper authorities who are obliged to investigate (*Krzywdzenie...*, 2008: 87-88).

Legislation concerning violence against children appears even more compounded and inconclusive when one realizes, as Konarska-Wrzosek (2003) maintains, that under specific circumstances, acts such as spanking are treated as justification when they involve minors, which means that they are not criminalized. This results from the fact that other laws give parents (and, to an extent, other adults including teachers) the right and obligation to bring children up, and punishment can be considered an instrument of it. Family law provides that upbringing practices should remain in line with a child's well-being and best interest, yet it remains rather unspecific about the allowable forms of punishment. It can be concluded, therefore, that all forms considered beneficial for the child are acceptable (Konarska-Wrzosek 2003: 2-3). As I will demonstrate shortly, in the view of many Poles corporal punishment is one of such forms. In consequence, while beating children by

other adults is generally understood as forbidden, there are no regulations that would explicitly prohibit parents from doing so.

Recent attempts to introduce a law that would render hitting a child illegal have been so far unsuccessful. Draft laws submitted for parliamentary discussion in 2008, while warmly welcomed by organizations working on the issue of child abuse, were met with resistance from some decision makers and sectors of the society. The Minister of Justice questioned the relevance of introducing legislation concerning the prohibition of corporal punishment, arguing that the existing laws (the Constitution and penal code provisions) are sufficient to safeguard a child's proper treatment. Some Members of the Parliament were unsupportive as well. For instance, one right-wing party MP stated:

> The prohibition of corporal punishment introduced by law seems controversial to me. It is not talking about violence, but about corporal punishment, and every spank can be considered such punishment. I think it will stir an intense discussion in Polish society. (First reading of the government's bill on the change of the law on counteracting violence in family, 5 March 2009)

The Member of Parliament points to one of the key issues in the discussion on child abuse in the Polish context, i.e., the belief that single spanks are not violence, and as such are a legitimate instrument of child's upbringing. This is strikingly visible in an article commenting on the draft law published in one of the most popular right-wing weekly:

> There is a difference between child abuse and giving a child a spanking or shouting at a child. A spanking helps promote discipline and responsibility. A child from an early age has to know that they cannot do certain things. (Szymowski 2009)

The view that spanking can be beneficial for children (or at least is not harmful) was also expressed during a public parliamentary hearing on the draft law. A representative of the Catholic Youth Association said:

> Provisions stating that no punishment can be handed out cannot be introduced, because I was spanked myself more than once. There is not a single person in the Catholic Youth Association who would not experience this kind of "violence," as it would be called by the law, and still we were brought up to be good people. From our point of view such regulations are dangerous.

The regulations were depicted as dangerous because they could threaten the family and its unity and integrity, which, as he said, is of the highest value. Similar opinions were openly expressed by another participant of the hearing from the Institute of Education and Family:

> It seems to us that the regulations included in the draft law aim first of all at undermining the authority [of the parents], pitting family members against each other, children against their parents. Spanking or not spanking a child is not a core issue. In the draft law the state tells us, the parents, how we are to bring up our children. The state has no right to tell us how we are to bring up children. There are people who know it much better, this is not the state's function, the state does not know anything about it.

These quotations are indicative of specific features of the perception of corporal punishment which is characteristic of Polish society: considering some of its forms non-violent and therefore acceptable, and the conviction that parents have the right to decide how to raise their children while the state should refrain from an excessive intrusion in family matters. Significantly, when ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Poland declared its conviction that the enforcement of children's rights identified in the Convention, and in particular in Articles 12 through 16 (i.e., those dealing with children's participation and decision-making power) takes place with respect for parental power and in accordance with Polish customs and traditions concerning the child's position in a family and beyond it. Such a formulation can serve as an efficient safeguard against any attempts to limit parents' power (including a parent's right to inflict corporal punishment) over children.

Nor surprisingly, violence against children appears to be rather widespread, as demonstrated by opinions expressed in a 2008 study commissioned by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy and carried out in a form of interviews with 3,000 respondents. 44 percent of the respondents stated that they knew at least one family in their neighborhood where violence against children took place. 31 percent said there was at least one family in their neighborhood where physical violence was inflicted, 31 percent knew of at least one family where emotional violence occurred, 17 percent – a family where economic violence[8] was inflicted on children, and 5 percent knew a family where children were sexually abused (*Krzywdzenie*... 2008: 12). The scope

8 Economic violence was defined in the report as spending a child's money without their consent or taking their own money away from them, or refusing a child a meal.

of violence against children appears still much larger when assessed by professionals working with children and families. In the same study 502 social workers, probation officers, pedagogues, medical staff and policemen were interviewed about their perception of violence against children. As many as 86 percent of the probation officers and 67 percent of the policemen knew of at least one incident of physical abuse of a child. 91 percent of the probation officers, 67 percent of the policemen and 61 percent of the medical staff claimed that they observed at least one incident of emotional violence.

Moreover, the acceptance of physical violence toward children is rather wide. According to a 2001 opinion poll, only 12 percent of respondents claimed that beating up a child too often may have detrimental effects and only 29 percent said that corporal punishment would not be appropriate in any situation. In a 2005 opinion poll, 22 percent of the respondents claimed that parents had the right to beat a child if this was to have positive outcomes while 20 percent said they often witnessed punishing children by spanking them, pulling their ears etc. (OBOP 2005). In the most recent 2008 opinion poll, as many as 78 percent claimed that there are situations when the child has to be spanked (CBOS 2008). 44 percent of the 2008 opinion poll respondents declared that in their view spanking had not done anyone any harm. The social acceptability of corporal punishment is also visible in the fact that as many as 37 percent of the 2008 poll respondents shared the view that spanking is not the humiliation of a child, but rather a regular method of upbringing.

Apart from the cultural factors I pointed to in the Introduction, violence against children could possibly be linked to the changing socioeconomic situation in Poland in recent years. The UNICEF 1997 Children and Violence report points out that violence is greater in countries where social and economic disparities are greater, which is the case of Poland (UNICEF 1997: 16). According to police data, the number of registered child victims of domestic violence rose from 23,929 in 1999 to 31,699 in 2008, reaching a peak of 38,233 in 2006 (www.policja.pl/portal/pol/4/318/Przemoc_w_rodzinie.html). Practitioners working for child support organizations also observe an increase in the number of reported incidents of violence against children (Krzyżaniak-Gumowska 2009). It remains unclear, however, whether the increase reflects a growing number of instances of child abuse, or rather a greater tendency to notify the police about them. Some data indicates that there might be a link between violent behavior toward children and external factors. 19 percent of the respondents in a 2008 study on violence against

children commissioned by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy said they inflicted violence on their child when experiencing problems at their workplace, while 30 percent – when having family or personal problems (*Krzywdzenie....*, 2008: 29-30). It could be expected that the increase in the number of reported cases of child abuse could be related to the stress and insecurity resulting from the experience of unemployment and poverty shared by many Poles.

## Childcare in Poland

The history of institutionalized childcare in Poland reaches back to the early 19th century when the Warsaw Charity Society was founded. Its aim was to provide care for orphans and abandoned children and support financially poor families (Bobrowska-Nowak 1978: 164). The Society began to gradually open childcare institutions for children of working parents in the territory of what was then the Congress Kingdom of Poland. In time, different types of institutions developed: free of charge, daycare centers for the poorest and underprivileged children run by charity associations, similar institutions founded by factory owners to look after children while their mothers were at work, and paid kindergartens operating in line with Fridrich Fröbel's ideas and catering to children from more affluent families. The latter, open a few hours a day, methodically supported children's physical and emotional development and served as school preparation. Some of the institutions provided secret patriotic education. Educational journals and books started to be published and caregivers were trained. By the outbreak of the World War I a significant network of different types of daycare institutions had developed, the latest developments in preschool care had been popularized and the basis for a systematic caregivers' training had been laid (Bobrowska-Nowak 1978).

The situation was more difficult in the territories of the Austrian and Prussian partitions. In the former, poverty and limited funding for schooling prevented education activists from the successful development of childcare institutions. Some institutions were run by convents, and only at the turn of the century did the growth of secular centers intensify. In the Prussian partition the "Kulturkampf" campaign was one of the main forces that constrained the formation of Polish institutionalized childcare. Nonetheless, several centers were established (Bobrowska-Nowak 1978).

After Poland regained its independence following the end of WWI, more systematic work in the field of childcare began in the territory of the whole country. The Teachers' Congress of 1919 established the Preschool Care Section which formulated recommendations concerning early childhood care, such as the need for the state to provide commonly accessible daycare institutions for the youngest children, ensure funding wherever necessary, or organize and monitor pedagogical training. The Preschool Care Section emphasized a clear distinction between schools and kindergartens, and called for cities to open daycare institutions. In the years to follow, legislation regulating kindergarten functioning and teacher training was passed. Nonetheless, the development of childcare institutions was rather slow and difficult. While some preschools offered cutting-edge care, the quality of many was rather poor. The number of preschools initially increased from 1,041 in 1919 to 1,920 in 1931, but later started to drop. Before the the beginning of World War II there were only 1506 preschools, most of them private (Bobrowska-Nowak 1978).

## Childcare after World War II

The organization of childcare changed again after World War II and the establishment of the People's Republic of Poland. Researchers observed that the exact shape of the rhetoric around childcare and childcare provision, as well as the ideology concerning the role of women, depended vastly on the economic context. Heinen and Wator (2006) distinguish three different phases in the postwar history of Poland, each of them characterized by its own understanding of the woman's role and the approach to institutionalized childcare. In the first period, from 1944 to 1955, large-scale postwar rebuilding and development of industry took place, which was accompanied by rhetoric that emphasized the need for all citizens to participate in the labor force. Moreover, in line with the newly adopted constitution that proclaimed equality between women and men, paid work was depicted as a means of liberating women from masculine domination (Heinen 2002: 73). Such a discourse had its practical reflection in the state's effort to enable women to reconcile motherhood and work through providing institutionalized childcare. As Heinen (*ibid*.: 74-5) points out, the number of places in nurseries (accommodating children below the age of three) increased from almost none in 1939 to 50,000 by 1954. The increase in the number of places available in preschools in the same period went from 80,000 to 400,000.

In the second phase, from 1956 to 1970, the deteriorating economic situation and, related to it, diminished employment in light industries and budgetary difficulties, resulted in a change of the discourse concerning women and childcare. Women were presented mostly as mothers and discouraged from taking up paid work outside the house. A stricter division between women's and men's sectors was reintroduced, and in 1961 a law was passed that encouraged an increase in women's employment only in those fields where the number of men was insufficient, thus opening the way to sexist hiring policies (Heinen 2002: 73). Provision of institutionalized childcare was also restricted: in 1970 500,000 places were offered, which covered only around 30 percent of children (*ibid.*: 75).

The situation changed again after 1970, when, along with intensified industrialization, women's participation in labor force became relevant. The rate of children enrolled in preschools rose from 29.5 percent in 1970 to 48.8 percent in 1980. However, as Heinen and Wator (2006) indicate, this did not constitute a real improvement given the overcrowding: the number of children attending preschools was twice as high as the number of places available. Moreover, the costs of providing institutionalized childcare led to the introduction of a number of instruments that transferred the responsibility for looking after children to families. One of them was the introduction of early retirement for women in 1975, which was intended to function as an incentive for women to give up paid jobs in order to take care of their grandchildren. Another was a series of leaves intended only for mothers: maternity leave was extended to 16, 18 or 26 weeks; child care leave was extended from one to three years; paid leave of sixty days was introduced to care for sick children. As Heinen and Wator (*ibid.*: 195) conclude, "one of the undeclared objectives was to make up for the deficiencies of state politics concerning child care institutions." Introducing a number of measures aimed at shifting the responsibility for childcare to families (which in practice meant to women) and providing only meager financial compensation for it, was more cost-efficient than ensuring institutionalized childcare services for all children. This was accompanied by a discourse (significantly influenced by the Catholic Church) that linked both proper care with care by the closest family members, and promoted the maternity role of women. Heinen (2002: 77) observes that such an approach, coupled with increasing difficulties of daily living (with women bearing their brunt), resulted in a warm welcome of the newly introduced measures by women, even though they strengthened the gender division of work and seriously disadvantaged women on the labor market.

At the same time, however, there was a pedagogic discourse on the importance of early childhood education. Kamińska (2003: 30) recalls a 1973 *Report on Education in the People's Republic of Poland* which pointed to worse preschool provisions compared to other socialist and Western European countries, as well as to particularly disadvantageous situations of children living in rural areas. Recommendations were made then to introduce preschool education for all six-year-olds. This happened in 1977, when school-based "zero" grade groups were also opened for children who could not be provided with a place in a regular preschool. Kamińska interprets these measures as the first steps toward lowering the compulsory school age and popularizing preschool education.

Although the provision of childcare services in the postwar People's Republic of Poland was inadequate for the needs of children and their families and the quality of the services was far from satisfactory, Heinen and Wator (2006: 190) observe that the regime provided social rights and took responsibility for ensuring a minimum level of protection for individuals. Besides childcare services which were virtually free of charge, they point to such elements of the system of public care as subsidies in food and housing or employment guarantees. Most of these, beginning with measures aimed at single mothers and mothers with young children, were seriously threatened or vanished altogether as a result of the post-1989 political and economic transition.

## Childcare after 1989

Heinen and Wator (2002: 191) point out that after 1989 the notion of public care disappeared from the political agenda in Poland. The notion of individual responsibility on the one hand, and the concentration on narrowly construed growth and the pressure to limit government spending on the other, had detrimental effects on public services such as affordable housing, free health care and childcare or subsidized vacation opportunities. A discourse of universal entitlements was replaced with one that prioritized a "safety net" only for the most underprivileged citizens (Bloch and Blessing 2000: 67).

Childcare provisions are a good example of the state's withdrawal from the obligation to ensure public care in the first years of the transition process. First, family support weakened significantly with measures such as family allowances or child care leaves being limited and reaching fewer families

(Heinen and Wator 2002). Second, institutionalized forms of childcare – nurseries and kindergartens – began to disappear and became more costly. This was the outcome of an interplay of a number of factors. Operating within the logic of rationalization and privatization, companies, that maintained 11 percent of preschools before 1990 (Pawlak 2006: 50), readily shed responsibility for them. Two-thirds of company-owned preschools were closed in the first years of the transition period (Heinen 2002: 80), and now companies manage only about 1 percent of preschools (Pawlak 2006: 51). At the same time, non-public education institutions, including preschools, began to open. Financed predominantly by parents, they remain targeted at a rather restricted group of affluent people who perceive providing their children with supposedly higher-quality preschool education as an investment. They cover a relatively small percentage of children (around 6 percent) (Kienig 2006: 69) and their number approximates 350-400 (Herbst n.d.).

Most importantly, the territorial reform of 1990 shifted the responsibility for preschool maintenance from the state level to the lowest municipal level. Municipalities are expected to finance preschools by drawing only on their own resources, as opposed to the financing of schools, where costs are shared by the central government (in the form of subsidies calculated on the basis of the number of students) and municipalities.

Placing the responsibility for preschool maintenance solely on local governments has had a number of disadvantageous effects on preschool education. First, the existence and quality of preschool services depend entirely on the awareness, good will and financial possibilities of municipalities. As a result, there are municipalities (rural areas in particular) where there are no preschools at all. In 2006, in one of the regions in Eastern Poland there was no preschool in as many as 75.6 percent of the rural municipalities (Herbst n.d.). Yet, the changes in the number of independent preschools and school-based 0 grade groups (for six-year-olds) across the country are also alarming: between 1990 and 2007, 4464 preschools closed down: 25 percent of preschools in cities and 51 percent of those in rural areas disappeared (see Table 1). The number of school-based 0 groups, which were intended to help improve the educational chances of children without preschool access, diminished by 4507 (33 percent): by 25 percent in cities and 44 percent in the countryside (see Table 2). This trend began to change in 2006 when new preschools started to be open (however, as Herbst n.d. observes, this applied only to cities).

Along with the shrinking of the number of places in preschools and school-based 0 grade groups available, the number of children enrolled dropped: by 18.5 percent in preschools and 54 percent in 0 grade groups (see Tables 1 and 2). This resulted in part from the decreasing population of preschool-age children, however, factors such as cutting down the amount of the state spending on preschools, the increase in the overall costs of preschool education, introducing a co-payment by parents (in independent preschools only) and a limited public awareness of the importance of early childhood education are also claimed to have played a role (Pawlak 2006: 50).

Table 1. Changes in independent preschool provision between the years 1990-2007

| | All | Cities | Countryside |
|---|---|---|---|
| The number of preschools closed down* | 4464 | 1763 | 2701 |
| The percentage of preschools closed down | 36% | 25% | 51% |
| Decrease in the percentage of children enrolled** | 18.5% | 15.7% | 28.5% |

Source: Own calculations based on GUS 2008b.

*The number of preschools kept decreasing until 2005. Between 2005 and 2007 the number of preschools increased by 106.

**The number of children enrolled kept decreasing until 2003. Between 2003 and 2007 the number of children enrolled increased by nearly 8%.

Table 2. Changes in school-based grade 0 groups provision between the years 1990-2007

| | All | Cities | Countryside |
|---|---|---|---|
| The number of groups closed down | 4507 | 1414 | 3093 |
| The percentage of groups closed down | 33% | 44% | 30% |
| Decrease in the percentage of children enrolled | 54% | 65% | 43% |

Source: Own calculations based on GUS 2008b.

Transferring the responsibility for preschools to the municipality level had other consequences. Since maintaining preschools is not immediately

profitable for municipalities, there is a strong pressure on economizing (Zybertowicz *et al.* 2006: 57). The need to cut down costs and look for alternative sources of funding was constantly present in the preschools where I carried out my research. I will take up this issue in more detail in Chapter 10.

## The organization of preschools

Preschool education is a part of the national system of education as such and is therefore regulated by laws that pertain to it as a whole. The management of preschools is shared between municipalities and the Ministry of Education. The Ministry and its local branches are responsible for developing teaching curricula, determining yearly objectives and monitoring preschools' efficiency in fulfilling their educational and care-related tasks. Municipalities, in turn, are fully responsible for providing mandatory preschool education for six-year-old children and overseeing public preschools. This includes opening and closing preschools, as well as changing their status, e.g. from public to non-public, financing them, constructing new buildings and carrying out renovation work, providing teaching aids, toys and equipment, designing and implementing recruitment procedures or hiring principals.

To a large extent preschools are considered educational institutions where children get ready for school[9]. This is evident in the name itself: "preschool" is a direct translation of the term used in Polish. As a result, preschools usually offer a wide range of educational activities: from teaching reading, writing and math (in the last year, "grade 0"), basics of natural science, religion, different types of sport and art activities, to extracurricular activities such as English (and sometimes other foreign languages), dance, theater, chess or tennis. Moreover, children participate in concerts, theater performances and trips. The objective seems to be to stimulate children's development by providing them with diverse input, and the number and types of activities

9 This is currently changing along with the gradual lowering of the obligatory school age. As preschools will be eventually attended by children up to five years old, their educational function is intended to give way to the focus on developing social skills. In this chapter I discuss the principles of preschool education that were in force at the time of my research. The educational character of the preschool as an institution that prepares children for school, rather than a place where children simply spend time with their peers and play, stood behind my decision to render the Polish term as *preschool*, rather than, for instance, *kindergarten*. In the Polish context, the school certainly "schoolifies" preschool (cf. Dahlberg and Moss 2005: 25).

offered are deemed to be an important criterion for assessing a preschool's quality.

Preschools function in accordance with ministerial regulations, the most important being the Law on the Education System. However, there are also a number of more specific regulations concerning teaching programs, handbooks, working with special needs children and so on. The Ministry of Education develops the Core Curriculum that preschools are obligated to implement. The Core Curriculum, which is defined as a set of obligatory objectives and content of teaching and upbringing, sets the main goal of preschool education as "assisting in and directing a child's development in line with the child's inborn potential and developmental possibilities in relationships with the social, cultural and natural environment" (*Podstawa...*). Specific tasks that preschools have to undertake are divided into four groups: getting to know oneself and to understand the world, acquiring skills through action, finding one's place in a peer group and a community, and developing a value system. The Core Curriculum is translated into specific teaching programs and handbooks approved by the Ministry of Education, which teachers are required to choose and implement in their everyday work. Teachers also have the right to design their own programs. In general, however, preschools' and teachers' freedom in deciding how to organize their work is rather restricted, in particular as far the content is concerned. They have more freedom in determining specific methods and ways of working, yet the strong pressure placed on teachers to cover the whole program may limit their options. Karwowska-Struczyk (2003) makes it clear when she states that the Core Curriculum is an instrument that the state uses to govern and control the preschool education system that, from the legal perspective, should be decentralized. In a similar vein, the top-down approach is easily perceivable at the level of teaching programs. Karwowska-Struczyk's (2003) analysis of teaching programs demonstrates that they are based on the analytic model in which an attempt is made to discover objective knowledge. As she points out, the construction of teaching programs reveals that it is the author of the program who possesses true, objective knowledge and shares it with the teacher, who in turn passes it on to children (Karwowska-Struczyk 2003: 71). In this way, children are treated as passive objects, but to a large extent so are the teachers.

There are three main forms in which preschool education is available: a public service (either independent preschools or 0 grade groups for six-year-olds at schools), a non-public service and, from 2008, various alternative

forms of daycare, partly financed by municipalities, but run by physical or legal persons, and having a more limited offer (e.g. lower minimum working hours per day and per week than in regular preschools). In 2006-2007, the last year of my research, the total number of the different forms of public preschool services in Wrocław was 100, out of which 77 were independent preschools. They provided a total of 11,161 places. The number of non-public preschools was 15 and they provided 1,412 places. (The total number of children at the preschool age was 17,803.) Non-public preschools are subsidized by the municipality (75 percent of the general subsidy per person) and are usually operated either by the Roman Catholic Church organizations or associations formed by parents or non-governmental organizations. The tendency toward introducing non-public (preschool) education has been quite significant in Wrocław. The authorities have argued that public preschools are incapable of fully meeting parents' expectations, which in part is supposed to be caused by the limited financial possibilities of some parents, who are unable to pay for extracurricular activities at public preschools. They have also claimed that the population of Wrocław is diverse in terms of affluence and educational expectations, and the local authorities are therefore obliged to give parents the opportunity to choose the educational track they consider most appropriate for their children. A solution to this was increasing the number of non-public preschools through converting public preschools into non-public ones. This process has indeed taken place in the course of last several years, and some attempts to change a public preschool into a non-public one have met with strong resistance from parents and teachers.

Parents are responsible for covering part of the cost of preschool education in independent public preschools. The exact fee is determined by the municipality and therefore differs from one place to another. In Wrocław parents pay a monthly fee calculated as 15 percent of the minimum income, as well as money to cover the costs of meals and extracurricular activities (with the exception of religion education, corrective physical exercises and sometimes speech therapy, financed by the municipality). Also, the Wrocław municipality has developed a support scheme that enables exempting poorer families from all or part of the fee. It applies to children raised in families with more than three children, or those with a monthly income of less than 30, 40 or 50 percent of the minimum income per capita. In the years 2004-2007, between 13 and 15 percent of children enrolled in preschools were covered by this kind of financial support. A proportional part of the monthly fee can also be deducted if a child misses preschool due to health problems.

## Preschool teachers

The conditions of teachers' employment are regulated by the Teacher Charter – a law passed in 1982 and later updated that specifies a teacher's obligations, required qualifications, professional development track, principles of hiring and remuneration, social benefits, etc. The Teacher Charter is treated by teachers as a collective agreement that gives them basic security. Recent years have witnessed several attempts to challenge the Teacher Charter (perceived by some as granting teachers privileges that other professional groups do not enjoy), always met with a strong resistance from the teachers' labor unions.

Preschool teachers, like teachers in other types of schools, are required to have obtained a higher education degree in the field they teach and to have completed pedagogical training. They can follow a number of paths: 5-year university or Education Academy MA programs, 2-year complementary MA programs (for graduates holding a BA diploma), 3-year BA programs at Teachers' Training Colleges, or usually 1.5 year postgraduate programs for teachers having a MA or BA degree, but not qualified to work in a preschool (Żytko 2006: 97). All of these programs rarely offer studies preparing to teach exclusively in preschools. Instead they combine preschool and early primary school teachers' training, which in itself points to the close link between preschools and school in the Polish education system. Future teachers are usually provided with instruction in general social science subjects as well as more specific pedagogical subjects. They are also required to complete teacher practice (*ibid.*). Preschool teachers are, generally speaking, well-educated. Given the requirement to have a degree in education and the obligation placed on teachers who lacked the appropriate training to improve their qualifications, the percentage of teachers with university degrees steadily rises. In 2002/2003 it reached 67.9 percent (Żytko 2006: 93) and in 2007/2008 – 89 percent. In the latter year only 1.1 percent of teachers did not have appropriate pedagogical training (*Nauczyciele...*). Teachers commonly participate in various forms of qualification improvement training. For instance, in the school year 2006/2007 almost 12 percent of teachers attended evening or weekend courses, postgraduate programs etc. (*Nauczyciele...*). In terms of the teachers' professional advancement as specified in the Teacher Charter, the majority of preschool teachers working in the years 2007/2008 obtained the third (47.1 percent) or fourth (29 percent) level on the four-level track (*ibid.*).

Some researchers have pointed out that teachers' participation in the formal professional advancement scheme may result from external pressure

rather than their personal need to improve their ability to work with children (Andrzejewska 2003). For many teachers, including those in my research, the obligation to improve one's qualifications in the formalized system entails an increase in work they consider bureaucratic and meaningless. At the same time, the present system of professional advancement does not encourage personal development (including autonomy, internal motivation for development or openness toward change), critical interest and involvement in the social and political sphere, or collaboration (*ibid.*). As a result, formal advancement does not necessarily mean an actual improvement of qualifications, while creative and inspired teachers may not benefit from the formalized system.

The teaching profession in Poland is dominated by women. This tendency is even more striking at the preschool level: in the year 2007/2008 women comprised 99.7 percent of preschool teachers (*Nauczyciele...*). Feminization of the preschool teacher profession is related to the common perception of it as a caring profession and a continuation of women's activities in the domestic sphere. The feminization, however, also implies a relatively low social prestige of the profession, which is reflected in teachers' incomes. In 2006 the average salary in preschool and school education was lower than both the national average income and the average income in the educational specialist sector to which preschool teachers are subsumed (2,576 PLN (€ 660), 2,654 PLN and 2,878 PLN respectively) (GUS 2007c). In the same year the average salary of a preschool teacher in the Lower Silesia region was 2,229 PLN (working data obtained from the Central Statistical Office, Wrocław). Salaries of teachers employed in private schools and preschools not covered by the Teacher Charter were even lower (1,927 PLN in 2006, GUS 2007c). In the view of the teachers included in my research, their incomes did not correspond to the amount and quality of work they did. They also did not feel recognized enough. I will discuss this issue in more detail in Chapter 10.

## The preschools studied – a general characteristic

The research was carried out in two public preschools in Wrocław, the fourth largest city in Poland and the capital of the Lower Silesia region. The preschools where I carried out my research were rather typical: both financed partly by the municipality and partly by parents, open for 10 hours a day, and of a regular size – they consisted of four groups (for a short period of time,

one preschool had three groups). Both preschools were rather popular and never experienced problems with insufficient enrollment rates.

As is the case in most public preschools, children were divided into age groups of three-, four-, five- and six-year-olds. There were, however, some exceptions from this rule and, especially in the last year of my research, the oldest groups consisted of both five and six year old children. Group assignment was determined by the staff and children could not decide in which group they would like to stay. Contacts with children from other groups were rather limited. Children could play with their older or younger peers only on the playground, at whole-preschool events and rarely during teacher-organized activities for more than one group. Each age group was assigned its own room and leaving it at will in order to join another group was not an option.

The preschools differed by their location and socioeconomic background of the children enrolled. Preschool A was situated in a rather poor, destitute neighborhood that, as research on the attitudes toward Wroclaw indicate, is generally disliked by its inhabitants and perceived as abandoned, run-down and dangerous (Błaszczyk 2006: 46). This is also one of the regions with the highest rates of social assistance benefits usage, including the family assistance benefit, which points to the impoverishment of its population (Szrejder 2006a, 2006b). In the principal's and the teachers' view, the preschool itself had been previously neglected and only the current principal had started undertaking serious efforts for improvement, e.g. refurbishing the building, purchasing new furniture and equipment or upgrading the playground.

A vast majority of children enrolled in Preschool A came from the neighborhood, and the economic hardships that many of their families experienced were reflected in the rate of children exempted from all or part of the monthly fee, which reached approximately 30 percent in the years 2006-2007. Another indicator is the number of children who stayed in the preschool for the last year. Since preschool education for the six-year-olds is mandatory and is provided both as a paid service by preschools and free of charge by schools, economically disadvantaged families tend to enroll their children at schools. In Preschool A, only 11 children out of 24 stayed in the preschool from their second year until the end of their final year. The majority of children who left the preschool early did it after their third year, which indicates that they might have been transferred to school-based 0 grade groups. Some of the children lived in single-parent families, sometimes with one parent working abroad. The analysis of the educational background of

the families in which the children enrolled in group 4 were raised shows that the majority of parents only had a high school education (9 mothers out of 18, and 7 fathers out of 17). 2 mothers and 4 fathers had a vocational education, and 2 mothers and 3 fathers only completed primary school. 5 mothers and 3 fathers finished higher education[10]. The cultural capital of the families appeared therefore rather low and it is quite likely that the children were not frequently stimulated intellectually by their parents. My conversations with the children revealed that only a few of them participated in any afternoon programs. Significantly, among those who did were boys attending karate or other combat training. It was also rather rare to see the children bring books or children's magazines to the preschool. Speech disorders were common, and approximately 50 percent of children attending the preschool participated in individual workshops with a speech therapist. In the assessment of one of the studied group teachers, only one out of fifteen 6-year-olds in her group had proper articulation.

Moreover, many Preschool A children experienced serious emotional problems. According to the teachers and the principal, many of them were not given sufficient care and love by their closest family members; several were diagnosed by a Psychological-Pedagogical Counseling Center as suffering deprivation and having various kinds of deficits. My interviews with children also revealed their experience of stress resulting from one of their parents being away (usually working abroad) and violence at home. Several children talked about being shouted at or beaten by their mothers and fathers. One girl, supported by her friends who said that they had the same problem, revealed her wish: she wanted her mom not to use bad language to her, not to yell at her and talk to her nicely.

The situation of Preschool B was rather different. Located in one of the most attractive and affluent districts (Błaszczyk 2006: 46), it attracted children both from the neighborhood and from new residential areas on the outskirts of Wrocław. The economic situation of the families in which children attending Preschool B were raised was better than in the Preschool A case, as illustrated by the percentage of reduced enrollment fee payments (15.5 percent in the years 2006-2007, figure for the whole preschool) and a low number of children who were transferred to free of charge school-based 0 grade groups (3). The cultural capital of Preschool B children's families was also higher. Several parents were academics or professionals. As many as 18

10 Data available for parents who returned a questionnaire I administered by the end of the children's fourth year in the preschool.

mothers and 14 fathers (out of 22) completed higher education. 4 mothers and 7 fathers had high school education, and only 1 father graduated from a vocational school[11]. High cultural and economic capital of their parents meant that the children were given opportunities their Preschool A peers did not have: they attended after-preschool programs, went to the movie theater and travelled more; many were encouraged to learn to read and write, and I saw them bring their own books or magazines. By the end of the preschool many children could read fluently and as one of the group teachers indicated, this could be attributed both to the fact that she started working on literacy skills with the group two years before the usual time, and that the children's parents supported and stimulated them.

Another feature that differentiated between the preschools was parents' involvement. Both preschools had a Parents Board that consisted of representatives of parents from each group and had the right to evaluate and support the preschool functioning. In the view of the Preschool A principal, however, parents' contribution to the preschool life was rather marginal. They rarely participated in the board meetings and, as the principal stated, "their attitude is to take, they want me to organize everything, do everything and they are happy, it is enough for them." The teachers also emphasized parents' limited interest, reflected, for instance, in their low attendance in open events and other meetings, as well as in their unwillingness to listen to and follow the teachers' suggestions concerning their children. Preschool B parents, on the other hand, not only participated in activities organized by the preschool, but also initiated their own events, such as the Children's Day party. Unlike Preschool A parents, they paid an additional small amount of money every month that could be spent on outings, theater visits or gifts for the children. They were also interested in the teachers' opinions about their children and tended to take them seriously. In general, Preschool B teachers were much more satisfied with their collaboration with parents than those in Preschool A.

The size of the group in both preschools was similar – approximately 25 children. In some years it dropped by 2 or 3 children (by 5 in year 2 in Preschool B) as children would leave in the course of the school year. However, the dynamics of the exact group composition differed, as illustrated in Table 3. While a similar number of children left or joined the group when children were in their second year or moved to their third year, the difference in the number of children who attended the preschool in their third year but not in the fourth, was striking. In Preschool A 16 children left the preschool

11 See footnote 10.

by the beginning of the fourth year. In Preschool B the figure was 6, including 4 who left in the course of the school year. 14 children in Preschool A and 5 in Preschool B joined in the last year. What these numbers indicate is a larger instability in Preschool A compared to Preschool B. Both teachers and children who had attended the preschool in the previous years had to get to know new kids, and the newcomers were forced to find their place among children who had already known each other. Some of the problems with the group functioning in Preschool A could perhaps be attributed to the changes in the group composition. Moreover, the gender composition in both groups differed. While the number of girls and boys in Preschool B group was almost equal throughout the years, in Preschool A there were approximately 5 to 8 girls. Preschool A teachers often pointed to this imbalance as a trigger for the group's misbehavior.

Table 3. Changes in group composition along with the move from one year to another (inclusive of children who left in the course of a school year)

| Pre-school | Year 3 as compared to Year 2 | | Year 4 as compared to Year 3 | | Number of children enrolled both in year 2 and 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Number of children who left | Number of children who joined | Number of children who left | Number of children who joined | |
| A | 4 | 7 | 16 | 14 | 11 |
| B | 7 | 6 | 6 | 5 | 14 |

As this comparison suggests, working with Preschool A children could possibly entail challenges for the teachers that Preschool B teachers had to take up to a much lesser extent. It could be argued that this was one of the factors that contributed to different ways of acting and relating to children by the staff members in each institution.

## The teachers

In each preschool the group I observed was supervised by two group teachers and an aide. The teachers worked shifts, which means that there was only one teacher working with the group at a given time. The aide's role was to assist the teacher only in matters such as meals or cleaning. The aides did not carry out any educational work with the children, and for most of the time they

were not in the group room. In Preschool A both teachers worked with the group during the three years I conducted my research. In Preschool B Ms Agnieszka taught the group during the whole period. The other group teacher changed a number of times. Ms Patrycja worked with the group in their final (fourth) year. The teachers who supervised the group in the second and third years featured marginally in my research. The table below gives a short description of the teachers who appear in the next chapters.

| **Preschool A** | |
|---|---|
| Ms Zosia | About to retire (the following year); has worked as a preschool teacher for 33 years<br>MA in preschool education, specialized in the use of drama in working with children |
| Ms Malgorzata | About to retire (the following fall); has worked as a preschool teacher for 23 years, 10 years in another profession<br>MA in history, specialized in teaching; postgraduate program in preschool education completed in 2000/2001 |
| **Preschool B** | |
| Ms Agnieszka | Has worked as a preschool teacher for 23 years<br>MA in preschool education<br>Her mother was a preschool teacher |
| Ms Patrycja | Has worked as a teacher for about 20 years (15.5 at school, 4 in a preschool)<br>MA in early primary school and preschool education |

All the teachers were quite experienced, although Preschool A teachers were visibly older than those in Preschool B. All of them were also highly valued by their principals. Ms Zosia used to work as a principal in other preschools and was presented with a number of rewards. Although each teacher had her own style of working with children, Preschool A teachers' approach to children was clearly different from that of Preschool B teachers. This could be related to the differences in the location of the preschools and children's backgrounds, as well as to the fact that Preschool A teachers, both approaching the retirement age, were older and possibly more stressed and tired than their Preschool B counterparts. It could also be argued that it was more difficult for them to adapt to the changing conditions of preschool education, including new demands placed on teachers, children's expectations

and behavior or parents' attitudes. I will discuss these issues in more detail in Chapter 10.

## Summary

The aim of this chapter was to provide general information on the situation of children and childcare services (with the focus on preschools) in Poland, as well as on the preschools included in the study. I discussed the impact of the systemic transition of 1989 on children, pointing in particular to issues such as increasing poverty among children, limited access to childcare services as well as widespread and commonly acceptable violence against children. I also analyzed the present functioning of preschools, focusing on changes that took place after 1989 as well as on the organization of preschool education, including the position of teachers. Finally, I characterized the preschools studied, pointing to specific problems that could surface in the everyday functioning of the institutions. My objective was to draw readers' attention to systemic and discursive factors that created the boundaries of the teachers' possible actions. Preschools are institutions situated in a specific social context, and what happened in the preschools I studied should be therefore interpreted as a reflection of processes and practices taking place in the society at large. As a result, adults' dominance in preschools should be perceived in the context of an inferior position of children in Polish culture, the underprivileged position of preschool teachers, and structural constraints (such as a high child-teacher ratio or teachers' heavy workloads). In a similar vein, differentiated practices of Preschool A and Preschool B teachers should be considered in light of their distinct working conditions.

As my analysis indicates, a preschool teacher's job is rather challenging. High demands are placed on teachers who are simultaneously given relatively little support and whose freedom and professional autonomy is limited due to a rather strict top-down structuring of preschool education. In the last chapter I will examine in more detail specific challenges and constraints that the teachers in my research had to face and that, in my view, help explicate some of their actions. While reading the following chapters it is important to bear in mind the fact that the teachers' behavior, while sometimes surprising, shocking or incomprehensible, was an outcome of an interplay between a set of systemic, structural and cultural factors rather than simply their personalities or individual qualifications.

# 2. Conceptual framework

## Theoretical background

My research was inspired by what came to be termed the new sociology of childhood. In their now classic text "A New Paradigm for the Sociology of Childhood?" Prout and James (1997: 8) outlined the following principles of this approach:

1. Childhood is understood as a social construction. ...
2. Childhood is a variable of social analysis. It can never be entirely divorced from other variables such as class, gender, or ethnicity. Comparative and cross-cultural analysis reveals a variety of childhoods rather than a single and universal phenomenon.
3. Children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspective and concerns of adults.
4. Children are and must be seen as active in their construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes.
5. Ethnography is a particularly useful method for the study of childhood. ...
6. Childhood is a phenomenon in relation to which the double hermeneutic of the social sciences is acutely present. ... to proclaim a new paradigm of childhood sociology is also to engage in and respond to the process of reconstructing childhood in society.

The new sociology of childhood has grown to become a large and diverse field of research. Alanen (2003: 28-29) distinguishes between its three main strands: the sociology of children (ethnographic studies of children's lives, building on the third and fifth principles of the Prout and James' paradigm), a deconstructive sociology of childhood (taking as its starting point the idea that the notions of a child or childhood are discursive constructions that influence the ways in which children are acted upon and in which they act themselves), and a structural sociology of childhood (in which childhood is perceived as a permanent element of the social structure of modern societies).

My study can be most accurately situated within the second strand, but I drew on elements from all of them. Inasmuch as I was interested in learning

about children's preschool experiences, the sociology of children remained an important inspiration. In my attempt to understand how children perceived their daily lives in the preschool, including relationships with their peers and teachers, I tried to attend to details of preschool organization and to adopt the child's perspective. This approach posits some methodological problems that I will discuss in more detail in a later part of this chapter. Moreover, I drew on elements of the structural sociology of childhood. This perspective assumes that children function socially as a distinct category and that their social status is reflected in the way they are treated, the rights granted or refused to them, or in their relationships with members of other social categories. The structural approach comes to play in the notions of generation and generationing processes (e.g. Alanen 2003), which I employ to discuss the ways in which adults and children position themselves and are positioned as separate groups. Specific positions that children and adults occupy in the social structure, as well as their discursive ramifications, serve as a resource in the practices of generationing.

Finally, since the issue of the dynamics of power relations in preschools was a primary concern for me, the deconstructive sociology of childhood was a particularly relevant point of reference. This strand draws on Michel Foucault's work, and indeed his analytics of power proved a fruitful approach for examining the functioning of power on a micro-level of daily life in specific institutions. In my analysis, I am using concepts from Foucault's "toolbox" to demonstrate how different forms of power operated in preschools to create more or less stable hierarchical structures. Two notions are of particular importance. First is the notion of disciplinary power which serves to illustrate how children are turned into proper preschoolers and, through techniques such as distribution, surveillance, assessment or ranking, learn to behave and use their bodies in an appropriate manner. The other is the notion of governmentality, which is particularly useful in demonstrating how children are gradually compelled to control and regulate their own behavior, thus being responsible for managing their own progress toward becoming a proper preschooler.

The Foucaultian approach also proves useful due to its conceptualization of power as constitutive rather than merely restrictive. Power does not simply constrain and repress; it also – or primarily – constitutes knowledge, discourses and subjects. I draw on this conception of power, along with the positioning theory, to demonstrate how preschool children and teachers are turned into subjects and take specific positions in the preschool structure. The

productivity of power also means that power entails a reaction. In fact, in Foucault's view, power exists only inasmuch as there is a response to it, and those who are its subjects are capable of undertaking an action. Such an approach is of particular importance for my analysis given the fact that – in line with one of the principles of the new sociology of childhood – I move away from the perception of children as passive, powerless objects of adults' practices. The idea that power circulates, that it is never given, once and for all, but that it exists in action, helps me conceptualize both children's resistance to teachers' actions, and teachers', sometimes violent, attempts to retain their dominant positions. Such an approach makes it possible to perceive preschool as a place of dynamic exchanges and games of power, in which all involved try to establish their status and position themselves in specific ways.

However, individuals are not in a position to establish their status in any way they like. This is where Foucault's concept of discourse proves particularly illuminating. Discourses are practices governing our thinking (what we perceive as the truth and how we construct the world) and acting. They establish the norm and the normal, and demarcate the thinkable and feasible. They "make assumptions and values invisible, turn subjective perspectives and understandings into apparently objective truths, and determine that some things are self-evident and realistic while others are dubious and impractical" (Dahlberg and Moss 2005: 17). I identify discourses concerning the child and the role of a teacher or early childhood education that circulate in the preschools and beyond them, and examine the relationships between such discourses and subject positions that open up (or close) for children and teachers. By doing so, I try to account for the actions of teachers and children, pointing to the dominant approaches to, and understandings of, children and adults, and their mutual positioning in the generational order. For example, control, surveillance and constraints that children experience can be linked to discourses of child-adult dichotomy, child protection or children's vulnerability.

I also look at a place that Foucault has been accused of overlooking: the effects of disciplinary practices seen from the perspective of those who are subject to them. McNay (1994: 100) recalls critics' charges that Foucault's discussions of disciplinary practices are carried out from the point of view of those who rule institutions, or that they aim to demonstrate how those practices begin to operate in the institutions. Moreover, she observes that despite his claim that resistance arises wherever power relations exist, this issue was not given a great deal of attention in this work (*ibid.*: 101). My

research focuses precisely on what happens at the level of those who are subject to power, and how they resist it.

Making use of the Foucaultian "toolbox," I do not employ his complete oeuvre, nor do I attempt to give a full account of it. I use some of its elements in order to test how they work as explanatory instruments. Therefore my dissertation is not precisely a Foucaultian study, and even less a study about Foucault's theory of power. It is concerned with ways in which power operates in specific institutions, and Foucault's concepts function as a valuable resource.

Whenever needed, I combine Foucault's concepts with other theoretical inspirations that I find illuminating. One, already mentioned, is the positioning theory (Hollway 1984, Davies and Harre 1990). Hollway (1984: 236) relates the notion of a position to the concept of discourse, pointing out that discourses make certain positions available that subjects can take up. These positions are relational, i.e., they influence each other. Hollway builds on Foucault's concepts of genealogy and power, attempting to demonstrate how people invest in specific discourses and are constituted by them. This enables a less deterministic understanding of the discourse and allows to see what stakes are related to different discursive positions. While not carrying out a systematic and detailed analysis of the processes whereby teachers and children take up specific positions, I use the concept of positioning to discuss the positions available to them and their ramifications. The understanding of positions as situated in a discursive context makes it possible to also attend to their transformations that result from changes in other discourses, for instance that of the child, the teacher or the preschool.

The methodological challenge of taking the child's perspective calls for other theoretical tools to solve it. The sociological phenomenological approach seemed to offer one. It asserts that what remains accessible to the researcher is a *reflection* of people's motives and beliefs in their actions, rather than the motives as such. Adult researchers perceive children's (or, for that matter, other adults') actions and can try to interpret them, but they have no access to the "true" rationale underlying them. As I will discuss in more detail later on, the child's perspective is always, at most, the interpretation of what an adult researcher believes is a child's interpretation of the world. If we assume that people do not live in a discursive vacuum, that discourses structure the rationale behind their actions and their actions themselves, and that people's pre-interpretation of the world remains in line with what is

thinkable for them, this perspective could, at this level, be integrated with the Foucaultian approach.

However, I also take, mostly political and ethical, inspiration from theories that emphasize children's rights and citizenship. The focus on constructing children as subjects of rights may appear problematic from the vantage point of Foucault's theory. Being constituted as a citizen, having the right to participate and to have a voice simultaneously entails subjection; becoming a subject means being loaded with new demands. Children as subjects are not freer; they are subjected in new ways. The control over them can be even more efficient and it becomes seamlessly integrated in their thinking and thus invisible, as several researchers have already demonstrated (e.g. Rose 1999, Fender 2001, Warming and Kampmann 2007). Foucault argues that societies without relations of power cannot exist and subjects are always subjugated. Still, some forms of power games and of subjection can be more desirable than others from the point of view of children's emotional and physical well-being. Of course, whether it is "better" or "more desirable" to be subject to physical coercion or to pressure to be responsible for one's own development, to discipline oneself and to learn even more is disputable and ultimately can be determined only on the basis of one's own ethical stance. The framework I am speaking from is grounded in the conviction that some means of subjection, including violence, are antithetical to preserving and appreciating one's dignity. This does not mean, however, that other ways are seen as unproblematic.

The concepts and theoretical approaches I use are introduced throughout the dissertation. I follow such an approach in order to avoid an artificial division into a theoretical discussion and an analysis of empirical data. Instead, I examine how specific conceptions can enhance understanding of particular events and practices.

## Specificity of research with children

Research with children in many ways resembles that with adults, although there are a number of features of specific importance to it (cf. James *et al.* 1998: 187). As Punch (2002) suggests, some aspects of the research process, considered typical of studies with children and adults alike, may potentially cause special problems in the case of the former. Rather than attributing such difficulties to differences between children and adults, she points to both

adults' perceptions of children as different, and to children's marginalized position in society. As she maintains, children are not used to communicating openly with adults, and adults lack the skills necessary for developing rapport with children without patronizing them. Children are accustomed to the fact that their experiences are often structured by the adult world, and their relationships with adults are frequently such in which the latter take a directive role (James, Jenks and Prout 1998: 189). As a result, as Holmes (1998: 16) writes, "some children find it hard to believe that a grown-up actually wants to go to school with them and learn about things such as play or friendship." The issue of power therefore amounts to one of the most significant aspects of research with children.

There are three main dimensions in which power relations between adult researchers and children involved in research can be considered: decision making, interaction and interpretation. The power of decision making refers mostly to negotiating access to the research site and to the form the research takes. As it has been frequently noticed (Ball 1988: 39; Holmes 1998: 15-6; Thorne 1993: 16), in school settings, adults (principals, teachers and parents) are the main gatekeepers, and "pupils are rarely asked whether they want to have a researcher in their lessons" (Ball: 39-40). Hood, Kelly and Mayall (1996) refer in this context to a "hierarchy of gatekeepers" and Wyness (2006: 195) points out that even though children now have their place in this hierarchy, they still occupy the bottom rung. Despite the increasing recognition that children's consent to participate in research is as important as that of adults, and that children should be provided with explanations of the study adequate to their age and level of understanding and asked for their consent (e.g. Fine and Sandstrom 1988, Holmes 1998, Alderson and Marrow 2004), children's possibility to opt in or out of research is still limited, especially when a discrepancy between a child's view on participation and that of his or her adult caretaker(s) occurs (Wyness 2006: 195-6). Moreover, Eide and Winger (2005: 77) emphasize the necessity of the awareness of "the limits of listening." As they say, "children must also be allowed *not* to speak, *not* to inform, *not* to express themselves, *not* to participate. Listening to children is a balance between inviting the child to openness, but at the same time protecting the child from being manipulated" (*ibid.*).

This relates to the second dimension of researcher-child power relations, i.e., interactions between them. Even when dismissing the notion of separate worlds of children and adults, there remain differences that cannot be entirely set aside (e.g. age, physical size, linguistic competence or knowledge) which

influence the relationships. The issue of a researcher's position in the field and establishing relationships with children and adults is therefore of major importance. Researchers point to a number of strategies aimed at downplaying the adult authority and establishing rapport with children. Particularly important is the willingness to interact with children on their terms and to relinquish one's adult dignity (Fine and Standstrom 1988: 21-2; Graue and Walsh 1998: 77-8; Holmes 1998: 17; Mandell 1986: 59). Researchers may ask children to call them by their first names (Thorne 1993: 16) or agree with teachers to be treated as students (Holmes 1998: 20). The role of a friend that researcher can take once in the field is a solution proposed by Fine and Standstrom (1988: 14-7). In their view it allows a researcher to shelve explicit authority while not pretending that the difference between the researcher and the children has been erased. In a similar vein, Corsaro and Molinari (2000: 180) argue for developing a participant's status as an atypical, less powerful adult. More radically, Mandell (1986; 1988) developed the "least-adult role" based on the assumption that all "ordinary forms of adult status and interaction – authority, verbal competency, cognitive, and social mastery" (Mandell 1988: 19) can be put aside, and even the impact of physical differences can be minimized.

The power on the interaction level takes yet another form. A close relationship between the researcher and the participants may lead to a greater, albeit more subtle, control and exploitation of the people studied (Skeggs 1995: 197; see also Atkinson and Hammersley 1998: 118). This applies to children as well, who can be induced into sharing information that, once revealed, would render them vulnerable. Wyness (2006) discusses this issue in terms of the confidentiality vs. protection dilemma. Researchers, on the one hand, are supposed to ensure that information their child participants share with them will remain confidential. At the same time they are legally obliged to attend to their well-being, which in some cases involves informing authorities about issues (e.g. concerning child abuse or exploitation) they discovered in the course of research. Researchers therefore may be obliged to inform research participants beforehand that they may be forced to disclose some information (*ibid.*: 198).

The final dimension power relations take pertains to the fact that it is adult researchers who are in a position to decide what data to choose and how to interpret it (Punch 2002: 329). No matter how close the attention to children's words and actions is, it is always adult-centered frames of reference that are applied to depict children's experiences (Alldred 1998: 154) and these

two are not necessarily compatible. As Thorne (1987: 102) concludes, children "will never be in central positions of knowledge-creation." However, an effort has been made to increase children's participation in producing research-based knowledge. First, alternative participatory research methods have been developed that give children the opportunity to influence the data production and interpretation to a much larger extent than when traditional methods are applied (cf. Clark 2005a, b). There have also been attempts to create possibilities for children to design, carry out, interpret and publish the results of their own research projects dealing with issues they found relevant (cf. Wyness 2006: 200). As these examples indicate, the choice of research methods remains one of the most significant issues in research with children.

## The research setting and approach

The basis of my research was a three year qualitative, ethnographically inspired fieldwork carried out in two preschools in Wrocław. Such a selection of the research sites has specific ramifications. First, it needs to be remembered that due to the fact that both settings were urban, my findings do not reflect the experiences of children living in the countryside or small towns. As demonstrated in Chapter 1, children's access to preschool provision (especially in the form of independent preschools) is more limited in rural areas. Moreover, certain common features of urban preschools, such as strict division in age groups or provision of a wide range of extracurricular activities, may be missing from rural preschools. Therefore, this project concerns representatives of a specific segment of the population of children.

Second, choosing preschools as research sites reflects the present tendency in childhood research to concentrate on settings arranged for children by adults. This entails focusing on institutionalized dimensions of children's lives (at the expense of the less institutionalized ones). At the same time, however, educational institutions, especially if they are not subject to extensive ethnographic research (which is certainly the case of Polish schools and preschools), still remain relatively unknown. As a result, they are still relevant research sites.

The decision to carry out research in two places was motivated mostly by my interest in finding out whether socioeconomic differences have any impact on interactions that take place in preschools, both among children and between children and adults. My original research interest was in various

processes of gender construction. I planned to explore them taking into consideration variables such as socioeconomic background (by including a private preschool institution), and religious beliefs (by including a Catholic church run preschool), so as to be able to draw comparisons between different milieus. Yet, given the specifics of ethnographic research, I soon realized that such a project was far too ambitious and rather impracticable. Not only would carrying out the fieldwork itself have been extremely challenging had I chosen more sites, but also the analysis of research findings would have had to be tremendously complex. However, I retained my interest in comparative research, thus the decision to choose two sites. A preschool managed by a religious organization was not included as I expected difficulties in getting access. I also realized that, given the wide presence of religion both in Polish culture as such, and in preschool education context in particular[12], there could be no significant differences between a regular public preschool and one managed by a Church organization. Private preschools, in turn, seemed targeted at a rather narrow and very specific segment of the population: fairly affluent, well-educated people who could afford paying a quite high monthly preschool fee, and who considered it important to invest in this manner in their children's education. While such a site would be an exciting research setting, facing the need to make a choice I decided to concentrate on public institutions.

First, public preschools are the primary option for the majority of Polish children who participate in institutionalized daycare; second, even though they follow the same basic curriculum and are alike in many respects, there are also significant differences between them. The main challenge was to determine what factors would differentiate between preschools the most and in a meaningful manner. I eventually decided to choose institutions that would differ on the basis of the socioeconomic background of the children who attend them. The criterion for selection was geographic location of the preschool. Although parents have the right to choose any preschool they want for their children, the location is an important factor. Many parents select an institution situated in the proximity of their workplace, but the recruitment

12 Roman Catholic religion is taught in the vast majority of educational institutions following the signing of the Concordat between the Holy See and Poland in 1993. Virtually all preschools in Wrocław offered religion instruction. This was the case of the preschools included in my research. Elements of religious education were also commonly featured in the general curriculum and children celebrated religious holidays and talked about events related to the Catholic church.

procedure encourages picking a place nearest one's home. Moreover, some neighborhoods are known for providing what is considered high-quality preschool care while others tend to be looked down on. As a result the preschool location, while not fully indicative of children's socioeconomic backgrounds, still seemed to be the most appropriate criterion, and following it, I selected two preschools.

I made the assumption that children's socioeconomic backgrounds and cultural capital may be related, with the latter having an impact on the perception of gender roles, meaning of femininity (girlishness) and masculinity (boyishness) and, eventually, the ways children position themselves and act as girls and boys. During the course of my research I changed my focus from practices of gender construction to broader processes of power operation in relationships among children and between children and adults. With this focus, the choice of the research sites I made still proved meaningful and fruitful. The two institutions, operating within the same framework of public preschool education and sharing numerous features, differed significantly. Surprisingly, the most striking differences did not concern the children, but the teachers' behavior and the organization of preschool life in terms of child-adult relations and a child's position in the institution. Yet I realized in the course of my research that conducting any kind of systematic comparative analysis was impossible with the choice of the research method that I made. The two preschools seemed so different in so many respects that attributing specific ways of acting to single factors would not be methodologically valid. This would require larger-scale research of a more quantitative character. Nonetheless, I succeeded in indicating certain tendencies that can be explored further. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, including two different preschools in my research enabled me to observe different ways of power operation in child-adult interactions. Such knowledge would not be possible (or would be very difficult) to gain without including more than one research setting.

My access to the preschools was negotiated first with the principals who, provided with a preliminary project description, introduced it to the teachers in the groups I intended to observe and asked for their consent. Parents' written consent was also obtained with the help of the principals and teachers. Problematically in the context of research on power relations, children were not asked to consent to be observed and participate in the study at the access stage. They were given an initial explanation of my presence by teachers, and during the whole research period I talked to them informally, answering their

questions concerning my work. As much as possible, I tried to get their consent in specific situations: I asked them if I could join their activity or sit at their table, and I would always leave if a child asked me to do so. The children were also entirely free to decide whether they wanted to participate in interviews or not. Nonetheless, the decision to let me stay in their room was not theirs.

In each preschool I followed one group of approximately 25 children supervised by two teachers working shifts and an aide. When I started my fieldwork, the children were four years old and in their second year of preschool. The selection of this particular age group was intentional, although not unproblematic. While it allowed me to stay with the children until they finished the preschool as competent preschoolers, capable of reflecting on their experience in the institution, I did not have a chance to observe their initial year there, when they made the transition from a private home setting to a public preschool and were introduced to its regulations and routines. My analysis would have probably benefited from being supplemented by material from the introductory year.

My fieldwork took place in three rounds: between December 2004 and May 2005, January 2006 and June 2006, and September 2006 and June 2007. Initially, the pattern was such that I observed in one of the places two or three times a week for approximately a month and then switched to the other. Later, when I became better acquainted with children and could more easily separate my experiences from one place from those from the other, I altered the preschool I visited from one day to another. I observed at various times, both during free play and more formal, teacher-directed educational activities. In the latter case, I concentrated mostly on activities carried out by regular group teachers rather than outside teachers conducting specific lessons (art, sport or English). I also participated in important events, such as children's performances for their parents, parties, Christmas or Easter lunches, and went on trips with the kids. Beginning with the second round, I audio recorded most of verbal exchanges that took places in the group and I used the recording along with my draft fieldnotes as a basis for writing up proper fieldnotes.

The choice of ethnography as the main research approach stemmed from a widespread conviction – also reflected in the principles of the new sociology of childhood – that it is one of the most revealing and fruitful approaches when doing research with children (e.g., Alldred 1998, Corsaro 1992, 1994, Holmes 1998, Kelle 2000, Thorne 1993, Woods and Hammersley 1993).

Based on participant or non-participant observation, ethnographic methods are seen as relatively unobtrusive to children[13]. They seem especially useful in the case of research oriented toward the analysis of power relations as they make it possible to examine how things happen – or are done – on a level of everyday practice, and what consequences certain practices can bring about.

While the research itself was not participatory or action research, I conceptualized and carried it out as progressive research, i.e., oriented toward enhancing social justice, and specifically, as contributing to increasing democracy in preschools and a greater attentiveness to children's well-being. Working with children, still a socially underprivileged minority group (e.g. Mayall 2002), I had an explicit goal of making their voices – usually ignored – heard and of bringing them to the forefront. Angrosino (2005: 739) points to three characteristics of progressive social agenda in research: "the researcher should be directly connected to the poor and marginalized;" "the researcher should ask questions and search for answers" (questions that stem from the experience of living with a given group rather than from academic expertise); "the researcher should become an advocate." My study concentrated on children, one of socially marginalized groups. I also made an effort to ask questions based on what I experienced interacting with children and adults in the preschools. Finally, I challenged some aspects of the preschool reality, seeing in this the basis for attempts to transform it.

Another important dimension of the research perspective has to do with the researcher's understanding of the child and childhood (James, Jenks and Prout 1998: 191; Wyness 2005: 198-9; Punch 2002). Such understandings have a strong impact on the research design, as well as on how researchers interpret research material, how they relate to children and what they hear them say. My

13 "Relatively" should be stressed here. First, staying in a place and observing is always obtrusive, and Fine (1993) refers to the notion of the "unobtrusive ethnographer" as one of the lies of ethnography. Second, distancing oneself from the setting and playing, in Fine's (*ibid.*) words, "an observant piece of furniture," can be seen as methodologically dubious. The conception of an ethnographer as someone who refrains from interacting with research participants and influencing the setting has been thoroughly questioned. Moreover, Fine (*ibid.*: 281) claims that being an active member facilitates the development of sympathetic understanding, thus improving the quality of research. On the other hand, and in a more general sense, Angrosino (2005: 731) points out that the notion of a research "subject" who could be observed by a researcher ceases to be appropriate; the notion of "dialogue" between the researcher and those involved in the research is much more in place. From such a perspective, the idea of unobtrusiveness in a research situation appears irrelevant.

perspective on children is partly inspired by what James, Jenks and Prout (1998) refer to as children as a minority group. Such a perspective acknowledges, first of all, the subordinated social position of children: adults and children are seen here as groups wielding different amounts of power, with the latter being victimized and powerless. In this way, children as a minority group is an overtly political perspective that aims to bring to light and challenge unequal social relations. Secondly, and more in terms of research practice, it calls into question the child-adult distinction by considering children competent, active subjects, both in a research context, and, in particular, in the social world which they share, but which is seen as an adult world. Thus the focus is on children's perception of that world, rather than on reconstructing a child's own world.

I complement the children as a minority group perspective with a poststructuralist Foucaultian approach that pays more attention to the discursive contexts of children's and adults' experiences, as well as to the multiplicity of subject positions that individuals can take and the varying amount of power that goes with them (cf. Alldred and Burman 2005). This allows for a more refined view on the issue of children's powerlessness: while recognizing their subordinate position as a social group, I also pay attention to the dynamics of power, trying to demonstrate how children position themselves as (more) powerful in some contexts. Moreover, as Alldred and Burman (*ibid.*: 176) point out, discursive approaches entail the analysis of specific statements against the background of cultural conceptions of childhood. This highlights an attempt to understand children's statements in the context of both "what it was possible for them to say" and "what it is possible for us ... to hear them saying" (*ibid.*). Therefore, I also look at a broader social and political context that structures children's (and adults') preschool experience.

## Writing from multiple perspectives

An important feature of my research is that while doing it, I attempted to adopt perspectives of different groups in the setting (i.e., children and staff) in addition to the position of the researcher. In has been already widely recognized in social sciences that knowledge is never "objective," that it is always produced from specific standpoints and therefore always reflects the way its producer is situated in the matrix of social relations (Haraway 1988).

Alderson and Marrow (2004: 23) point out that the choice of a standpoint is an ethical matter, and the specific viewpoints that childhood researchers take have consequences for obtaining and interpreting children's accounts.

Furthermore, sociological phenomenology recognizes the fact that the social world in which people live is a world that is already structured and meaningful for them because they pre-interpret it in line with a set of mental commonsense constructs. Such constructs make it possible for them to establish their place in the social world by determining their actions or goals (Schütz 1984: 140). This also means that in the process of comprehending the reality, people single out some of its aspects that are of relevance to them (*ibid.*: 139). While the perspectives from which people perceive the world correspond to some extent with each other and people act on the assumption that they share their social reality, Schütz claims nonetheless that, in general, we have no access to the others' perspectives structured by their unique, complex biography *(ibid.*: 156). This implies that, as he says, what is given to us is only a chance of understanding the other's action, and in order to enhance our understanding, we need to seek the meaning that a given action has for the other (*ibid.*: 164).

The fact that individuals live in a world they have already pre-interpreted has methodological consequences. Social researchers deal with such constructs established as a result of individuals' mental activity, rather than with any bare facts (*ibid.*: 141). If researchers are to comprehend people's actions, they need to learn about their motives. What they have access to, however, are only observable fragments of acts carried out by people involved in social interaction. In Schütz's view, therefore, it is necessary for a researcher to draw on their knowledge of interaction patterns typical of similar contexts in order to reconstruct an individual's motives and thereby comprehend their actions (*ibid.*: 167).

The phenomenological approach has two main implications for my research. First is the recognition of the multiplicity of perspectives that results from unique positions and biographies of the people in the field and an attempt to adopt them. Importantly, in approaching children, teachers, or principals as groups that interpret their social reality, I disregarded, to an extent, individual differences within a group, thus pre-constructing them as a category. Such a construction is inevitably partial, which means that I may be overlooking some of their motives for specific actions. Second, as an outside observer, I only had access to some aspects of their multifaceted actions. By following teachers and children closely and by talking to them, I tried to

understand better their motives and the meaning of their actions, yet what I ultimately developed are my own constructs. I cannot claim to have captured the preschool reality as teachers and children constructed it themselves, and even less as it "really" is. The challenge is to get as closely as possible to it by making a conscious effort to understand the meaning that the preschool world has for children and teachers, and the rationale behind their actions.

## The child's perspective

The child's perspective – very difficult, if possible at all, to fully adopt – was one I was particularly interested in taking. Researching and writing from the child's perspective, with the hope of learning what children think, like and want, is important for a number of reasons. First, it is a response to the marginalized social position of children, long recognized by international childhood researchers. As Alldred (1998: 148) writes, "Children are another socially silenced group: their opinions are not heard in the public sphere and they wield little power as a social group." Polish research on children and child care institutions is a good case in point. The vast majority of studies concerning preschools have been formulated from the perspective of teachers. Many of them aim at providing educators with suggestions concerning specific teaching problems. This rather technocratic and goal-oriented approach does not leave much space for hearing children's voices. Indeed, it does not conceive of children as research subjects and participants. Significantly, this remains the case even as far as more critical, sociological studies are concerned. Recently a book titled *Symbolic violence in preschools* (Falkiewicz-Szult 2007) has been published. It is based on large-scale research conducted in several preschools in one Polish city with the participation of 210 preschool teachers, and its significance for uncovering the scope and scale of symbolic violence that children experience in daycare institutions cannot be overestimated. Yet it virtually silenced children. Not only were they not included as research subjects (which can be explained by the author's focus on teachers), but they were also treated with less consideration than the adults: for instance, teachers' faces were blacked out in order to protect their anonymity, but not those of children. In this context the decision to include children as full-fledged research participants has a double meaning. It opens up the possibility of gaining access to children's knowledge of the social world in which they live their daily lives; knowledge that tends to be obscure or disregarded as irrelevant. But it is also a political decision inasmuch as it

contributes to changing the children's position: as Alldred (1998: 150) claims, the research process itself can be perceived as a means whereby marginalized and silenced groups can regain the status of subjects and be heard. Making the effort to bring children to the fore in the research process presupposes treating them as serious, respectable and knowledgeable partners capable of having their own views and expressing them. Such a perception of children departs vastly from that typical of approaches that construct children as mere objects of a teacher's educational endeavors.

Attending to children's perspectives and developing knowledge from their standpoint means that specific aspects of their daily lives can be revealed. In particular, the extent of children's subordination in educational institutions and the imbalance in child-adult relationships can be unearthed. Research carried out from the teachers' (or other adults') perspective is more prone to concentrate on the functioning of preschools and to fail to give an account of the situation of children, in particular as they experience it. It could be argued that there is a degree of correspondence between research conceived in such a manner and children's daily life in childcare institutions. Children's marginalization and invisibility in research may be related to their marginal position in preschools, both of which stem from children's low status in society at large. Doing research from the child's perspective amounts therefore not only to the production of new knowledge, but also to calling into question basic assumptions of preschool education.

The notion of the child's perspective, however, poses numerous questions. What does it mean to take the child's perspective, listen to children, give them a voice or hear them (as the practice of highlighting children in research or educational practice tends to be referred to)? What kind of presumptions have to be made to do so? What is actually a child's perspective? To what extent is it actually possible for *adult* researchers and practitioners to take the *child's* perspective? The following section takes up these questions.

## The concept of the child's perspective

The concept of the *child's* perspective itself appears problematic. First, it is embedded in a specific understanding of a child that underscores the child-adult distinction. In Alldred's (1998: 151) words, "It constructs children as little aliens to the dominant culture, the exotic objects of some other culture." What follows, she adds, is a risk of rendering them a "special case" that deserves attention mostly due to its difference from the dominant model. At

the same time, however, singling out children can be crucial for their emancipation. As Moss and Petrie (2002: 104) state, legal regulations such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, work to position children as a separate, distinct group, "a minority group capable of oppression and exploitation by adults," which means that "children can be placed in emancipatory frameworks, similar to those used to promote the rights of other minority groups" (*ibid.*). Recognizing them as such a group can therefore foster attempts to listen to children and identify their distinct experience of living in an adult-centered world and, as a consequence, to change that world so that it is more responsive to their needs.

The notion of taking the child's perspective requires deeper reflection in the research context. First, the issue of access to the child's perspective arises. Some researchers attempt to position themselves as children in order to experience what children experience in a given setting. For instance, Mandell (1988) talks about the least-adult role in which she tried to live in a preschool setting as much as possible in the same way as children did. However, there still remains the question of whether what researchers get hold of is indeed the *child's* perspective, or rather the *adults' interpretation* of it. From the phenomenological perspective, it can only be the latter. In the context of childhood research, Broström (2006: 233) makes a useful distinction between "ways in which adults look at children and reflect on what they, as adults, perceive to be the children's perspective" and "how children look at their own world, their conditions, and themselves." In a similar vein, Komulainen (2007: 23) urges one to critically reconsider the notion of (as she calls it) children's voice. She emphasizes that it cannot be approached in a realist manner; the child's voice is as much a social construction as, for instance, childhood, and, what is particularly important, it is mediated, constructed and interpreted by adults. When responding to children's views – both in research contexts and when developing polices and services for them – adults have to therefore rely on their interpretations of what they think children communicate (Alldred 1998: 152). As Broström (*ibid.*: 234) concludes, "children's perspective must ultimately be defined as the adults' attempt to understand, often through imagination, the thoughts and views children have on their own life."

If a *child*'s perspective or voice is in fact an *adult*'s specific reading of it, attentiveness to researchers'/practitioners' conceptions of childhood and the child gains a paramount importance. Alldred (1998: 155) maintains therefore that "children's voices are heard through cultural constructions of childhood," i.e., they are always filtered through adult researchers' or practitioners' ideas of

who children are, what they are capable of, or what childhood is. As a result, she suggests that there may be a need to attend not only to children's perspectives, but also to adult conceptions, including that of childhood. Komulainen (2007: 26) captures this in the notion of reflexivity as a research strategy, pointing to the need to reflect "on not simply what one 'hears' as a researcher, but on what one expects to hear, and how these expectations may frame the dynamics of adult–child interaction." Adults' preconceptions can prevent them from taking notice of what children say or lead them to interpret it in line with what they think children should or might be saying, and therefore need to be examined carefully.

Yet, research and educational approaches that highlight the child's perspective do not necessarily focus on extracting children's views. The Mosaic approach, for instance, aims at enabling children to "explore their understandings without the fear that they have to second-guess the intended response" (Clark 205b: 36), while the "pedagogy of listening" of Reggio Emilia talks about children making meaning of the world around them as they participate in preschool life (Dahlberg and Moss 2005: 102). This relates to an observation that Warming (2005: 53) makes: that there is not anything such as "essential or authentic children's perspective." Instead, there are multiple and changing perspectives that have to be analyzed in their multidimensional contexts. In the same vein, Komulainen (2007: 13) emphasizes that "'voices' manifest discourses, practices and contexts in which they occur." What children say (and what they refrain from saying) is grounded in their family and social location, as well as in their ideas as to what can be communicated to an adult researcher, and those factors have to be attended to while trying to establish a child's perspective.

## Ontological and ethical implications of the child's perspective: conception of the child and child-adult relations

Adopting the child's perspective has specific implications as far as the perception of the child is concerned. In Broström's (2006: 233) view, "The fundamental concept underlying the 'children's perspective' orientation is that children are competent, have rights, and should be viewed as contributing members of a democratic society. Children are not preparing to be competent or to earn rights or to contribute. They *already are* capable of active participation and competent use of their rights and agency." In the Reggio Emilia approach such an understanding is captured in the notion of the "rich

child" who is a co-constructor of knowledge, culture and identity (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence 1999: 50). Such a child is perceived as communicative and intelligent from the beginning of his or her life, and as an "active interacter, not a passive receiver" (*ibid.*: 59). In the same vein, the Mosaic approach is based on the conception of children as "beings" rather than "becomings," typical of the so-called new sociology of childhood (Prout and James 1997). The emphasis is thus put on the fact that their voices should be heard and respected due to their status as full-fledged members of a society and not for who they will develop into as they grow up (Clark 2005a: 2).

The perception of a child as a rich, competent and communicative co-constructor entails a shift in the child-adult power relations. Adults need to stand down from their position of protective and nurturing caretakers and relinquish some of their power as leaders/instructors who know and indicate what and how things should be done. It is the children who take an active role and decide what is of significance to them and what they want to explore and talk about; they may also cause the research focus (or preschool activities) to change (Clark 2005b: 45-46).

Finally, the choice of the model of a child and childhood in research is an ethical issue. As Alderson and Marrow (2004) emphasize, it has an impact on the methods of collecting and interpreting data. Therefore, they urge researchers to reflexively consider the models they assume.

## The child's perspective in my research

My interest in learning about the preschool reality from the children's point of view was triggered by the limited presence of their perspective in analyses of Polish daycare institutions. Assessment projects carried out in preschools by local councils of education that include views of teachers and parents fail to ask about children's opinions. My conversations with teachers also revealed that children are rarely directly inquired about their views; instead teachers assess their attitudes toward various practices by observing and interpreting their reactions. Striving to open up a space for children to talk about their experiences through my research was an attempt to respond to that deficiency.

Given the fact that what researchers have access to is their interpretation of children's voices, I do not claim that I managed to learn what children really thought and experienced. Still, it should be emphasized that I did attempt to experience life in preschool from their perspective as much as possible. I spent a lot of time sitting on the floor with children during their

free play time, I usually sat at their tables, I participated in their games and sometimes got scolded for misbehavior along with them. In some cases I think I shared their frustration, dissatisfaction, boredom or excitement. Nonetheless, being an adult and outsider I could never be fully a part of their world and my interpretation of their feelings in a given situation is always only a more or less informed estimate.

The impossible task of fully taking up the child's perspective was further complicated by the fact that I attempted to learn about their views mostly by talking to them. As Punch (2002) notices, given their position in adult-dominated society, children may either refrain from saying freely what they would like to say or say what they believe adult researchers would want to hear and would be pleased with. Moreover, my research resulted in creating a fairly artificial situation in the preschools: perhaps for the first time children were openly asked by an adult to reflect on their lives in preschool. They knew what I was interested in and were perfectly capable of inventing responses that could fit my interests. For instance, when talking about their ideal preschool, they often referred to pieces of equipment or spatial arrangements within their sight or developed schemes they knew were entirely unrealistic. Taking such statements as expressions of what the children really thought about what their institution should be like would probably not be accurate. As a result, my approach to what children said was not necessarily to take their words literally as a direct expression of their views and beliefs. Instead, I ventured to link what they said with what I observed happen to them in the preschool. In order to make sure I understood what they were talking about, I tried to find out why they made specific statements and what they meant by them. By attempting to connect particular events and children's openly expressed opinions about them I was able to rethink my interpretation of the former more in line with how children said they had experienced them. On the other hand, I could also ground my interpretation of children's words in actual everyday events. This can be seen as a response to what Eide and Winger (2005) identify as one of the challenges of research: how to ethically interpret the data. As they ask: "What has the child really told the interviewer and how can the interviewer understand this? Is it possible for the adult interviewer to understand the child's world? How can we know that we have interpreted the data in a correct way?" (*ibid.*: 82). My interpretation of children's views derives from the interplay between what children said and my observations of how they acted and responded to specific situations, which allows me to believe

that while it is still an interpretation, it is one relatively well grounded in preschool reality.

In the context of my research, searching for the child's perspective also stood for investigating circumstances under which children are willing and able to express their views and communicate openly with adults. Clearly, children were more open to the idea of sharing their opinions with me than with their teachers. If daycare institutions are to be children's spaces, where children are able to communicate their views and which they can therefore shape, learning how to create conditions that would enable such a participation is of utmost importance. Writing about the child's perspective therefore entails a meta-reflection on its theoretical and practical possibility.

Finally, taking the child's perspective as predominant had implications for the way in which the teachers feature in my work. Interpreted from the child's perspective (or, rather, in line with what I believed the child's perspective was), some adults' actions appear highly problematic and questionable, and the portrayal of teachers working in the two institutions that emerges from my analysis appears rather unfavorable. To some extent, this may be an inevitable consequence of privileging the description of the preschool world "from below." From the perspective of children, as well as of someone who tried to follow their paths and understand how they felt in the preschool, daily life in the institution appears to be organized around a web of regulations, restrictions and rules that seem arbitrary and meaningless, while adults emerge as authoritarian rulers directing children at will. In order to, at least partly, counterbalance this impression I tried to comprehend the conditions in which the teachers worked and which influenced their actions.

## Writing from the staff's and the institutional perspective

While I made an attempt to learn about the adults' experience of the preschool reality, I cannot say I fully took the staff's perspective. I tried to get to know the teachers' and principals' views on what took place in the preschool, yet their interpretations are not nearly as prominent as those inspired by the children's opinions or my own perception of the preschool life. As a result, my account is partial and the teachers' voices are not as audible as the children's or mine. This could be considered a weakness of my analysis and I am aware of the fact that my interpretation of the preschool life could have been different had the adults' voices been represented more.

Still, I do make some room for the teachers' views as well as for my own reconstruction of the institutional context in which they worked. While at no point during the research did I try to act as one of them (and in fact I resisted their attempts to position me in this way), being an adult I was easily associated with the staff. At the same time, however, not having either preschool teaching education or experience working in a daycare institution, I was deprived of the knowledge of preschool functioning: specific regulations, details of institutional practice or routines. My experience of having worked for a year as a primary school teacher was relevant and often enlightening, yet not sufficient to always understand why the staff acted the way they did. Moreover, coming to the preschool on a relatively irregular basis and interacting with children as a friendly, atypical adult, I could not develop the awareness of what it was like to work with children on a daily basis, having the constant responsibility for their well-being, safety and learning. I had a rather privileged position in the preschool structure[14], which prevented me from experiencing the role that emotions and physical toll played in teachers' interactions with children. Still, as my research progressed, I became quite aware of the enormous importance of the teachers' emotions, and learning about them was crucial for understanding their actions.

Moreover, while I appreciated the teachers' devotion and passion which they put into their work, in some situations I was deeply dissatisfied or even shocked with their actions. Yet, having observed them in different contexts, I sensed there could be reasons for their behavior other than their personalities or skills. Trying to take the teachers' perspective meant that I wanted to get to know the problems and challenges they had to face, thus searching for socially-grounded, rather than individualistic explanations for the adults' actions. In this way, I tried to reconstruct the institutional context of their work.

Yet a question remains as to the extent to which the *teachers*' perspective in my writing is indeed *theirs*. I necessarily interpreted all that the teachers told me and confronted it with my own view on the teacher's role, a proper teaching practice and child-adult relations. Even though I went to great lengths to sympathize with the teachers and to understand their position and the constraints and pressures they had to cope with, I still inevitably assessed

14 This was often emphasized by the staff members who commented on my work as a researcher as very attractive (as I could just come and observe or play with the kids, not being responsible for them) or claimed that if I had spent 6 hours a day everyday with the children I would have really known what it felt like.

their actions in light of what I believed they should have been doing. As in the case of the child's perspective, here as well I am aware of the fact that what I have access to is only my interpretation of the teachers' perspective.

## Writing from the researcher's perspective

The third – in many ways primary – perspective I took was that of a researcher. As a researcher, I was an outsider with a relatively intimate knowledge of the setting. Still, I was lacking the insiders' sense of the place as I knew little about its history, had limited contact with parents and even less with authorities. At the same time my position was special: situated between the children and the staff, I tried to integrate what I learned from both groups, combining that with my views on preschool education, childcare, the child and child-adult relations. Such a position makes it possible for me to problematize and question aspects of everyday preschool life the insiders take for granted.

As a researcher, I am writing from a certain theoretical-ethical perspective. It is a perspective concerned with children's well-being, informed further by a specific notion of the preschool. I draw on the idea of the preschool as a place where children would have a voice and be heard, where adults and children would work on developing less hierarchical ways of relating to each other; of preschool as a progressive, democratic institution where critical thinking and search for alternatives would be of utmost importance. My analysis is influenced by the rejection of the notion that adults obviously rule (or should rule) on the basis of their age and social position, as well as that children have to subordinate simply because they are younger, inexperienced, unaware of what is beneficial to them, and requiring adults' protection and guidance. I am writing from a perspective of critical progressive education with its ideals of emancipation and transformation as main values (Freire 2000, Freire 2005, hooks 1994). As a result, my research, like any other, cannot be treated as neutral and objective. Unavoidably, what I see and write is shaped by what I believe preschool education should be like.

## Implications of the use of multiple perspectives

On the epistemological plane, writing from multiple perspectives leads to the development of distinct bodies of knowledge established on the basis of the voices of teachers, children and my own voice as a researcher. These bodies of knowledge correspond with each other and produce a multifaceted picture

of the preschool. Yet what the use of multiple perspectives brings to light is the recognition that there is not anything like "the truth" of the preschool which my research could "discover." I am fully aware of the fact that what I offer is a partial reading of the preschool reality as I experienced it, with my attention drawn to situations I found most relevant, interesting, shocking or surprising, while focusing on specific events or actions more than others. I confront and combine my reading with what I interpret as the professionals' or the children's understanding of the preschool world, and discrepancies between these different readings point to the extent to which preschool "reality" is subject to interpretation.

As Angrosino (2005: 731) states, "Ethnographic truth has come to be seen as a thing of many parts, and no one perspective can claim exclusive privilege in the representation thereof." Interpretation of any situation is to a large extent informed by one's theoretical framework, values or worldview, and I have no doubt that teachers, educational authorities or children would often disagree with at least elements of mine. Moreover, the belief in the possibility of arriving at the truth of a setting is also based on the assumption that what an ethnographer observes and later depicts in a research report is a complete picture of what is happening in a given setting. Yet, Fine (1993) considers the concept of the "observant ethnographer" who succeeds in capturing all that is important about a given site one of the lies of ethnography. "We mishear, we do not recognize what we see, and we might be poorly positioned to recognize the happening around us" (*ibid.*: 279). I accept the possibility that some of my interpretation is inaccurate due to the fact that I might have been tired, misunderstood what was being said, overlooked certain actions or lacked contextual knowledge.

The perspectives I tried to adopt are obviously not all that could be taken in the course of research in a preschool. I concentrated mostly on *some* of the actors operating *within* the two institutions: the children and the group teachers were given ample space in my research, the principals were also present (they were interviewed and I talked to them informally throughout the project), but the aides and other technical staff members were included only as much as they were visible in the course of everyday life in preschools, and I made no attempt to systematically learn about their views. The parents' involvement was even more limited. While acknowledging potential benefits that could result from including them as research participants, I realized that this would go beyond the scope of my capacities. The parents' participation was therefore limited to their completing of a questionnaire that dealt with

issues such their attitudes toward various forms of violence against children or reasons for selecting the particular preschool. This served the purpose of contextualization, as did my analysis of preschool documentation (bylaws, work plans, group registers and the like) that provided insight about the general organization of the specific preschools.

Preschool reality could as well be studied from the perspective of local- or state-level authorities, as well as with focus on the institutional dimension of childcare provision. I include this perspective only to a very limited degree and only when it is necessary for understanding what was happened in the preschools. My research is therefore limited to what happens inside the specific institutions, or to be more precise, in the particular groups I followed. However, I reach beyond the preschool walls as much as is needed for acquiring contextual knowledge that would enable to me to understand better the teachers' behavior or certain structural arrangements. I take into consideration pieces of legislation related to preschool education, opinion polls that shed light on issues related to children's status or child-adult relationships, and statistical data about institutionalized child care and the situation of children. Nonetheless, the main focus on particular preschools remains clear.

Doing research with the objective of adopting multiple perspectives has specific methodological consequences as well. Getting to know children's views required different methods than inquiring about adults' opinions. In the following section I discuss the choice of research methods that resulted from my use of the different perspectives.

## The child's perspective – methods

The use of research methods in studying with children has been widely discussed. Christensen and James (2000: 2) argue that doing research with children does not have to entail resorting to specific methods, different from those used in studies with adults. Like adults, children can be observed, interviewed or asked to fill in questionnaires. Yet, they claim, "Children are not adults. Researchers need, therefore, not to adopt different methods *per se*, but to adopt practices which resonate with children's own concerns and routines" (*ibid.*: 7). In a similar vein, Punch (2002: 330) calls for the use of multiple methods and combining those typical of research with adults with alternative approaches. In her view, this can both prevent researchers from patronizing children, and enable them to create conditions in which children

will feel more comfortable. While recognizing the importance of alternative methods in research with children, I used mainly those considered more traditional, i.e., observation and interviewing.

## *Observation*

Since observation was my primary method of learning what was happening to children and how they responded to it, I spent most of the time observing among them. Since I assumed that my presence may not always be welcomed, I would ask their permission to join. While in most cases children agreed, a question remains as to the actual possibility of them rejecting my request. Given Punch's (2002) recognition that children are used to living in adult-dominated society and not being treated as equals, it could be argued that their consent at least partially resulted from their discomfort of saying no to an adult. Bearing this in mind, I tried to attend to children's body language as much as to their words and refrained from joining them when I suspected they might have not wanted it. Similarly, I interpreted their walking out of an activity if I was around as a sign that they were not comfortable with me observing them and I usually did not follow them to another spot. In most cases, however, I faced the opposite challenge of having to choose one invitation out of several groups wanting me to join. This was particularly common during lunch time or table work, and in such situations I tried to alternate the groups in order to minimize the feeling of resentment and disappointment among children as well as to gather data pertaining to all of them.

The pattern of my observations varied depending on the type of activity children were engaged in and my specific purpose. While observing during teacher-directed activities I was mainly concerned with the role children played in the development of child-adult power relations. I therefore observed the whole group, concentrating on how children responded – individually or collectively – to teachers' attempts to position them in a specific way. I was particularly interested in the ways children either tried to undermine the adults' authority status through rebellion and resistance, or accepted their own subordinate position. This in part was my focus also when observing during free play time since *free* play was rarely the case; in most situations (especially in Preschool A) the staff members intervened in one way or another. Such instances were of particular interest to me as they shed light on the child-adult relations. Yet, during the free play observation I was mostly concerned with

children's in-group interactions as an arena of power operation. I concentrated on the ways in which power structures were established, threatened and modified among children, and specifically if and how they reflected hierarchical structures that developed in the course of child-adult interactions. For this purpose I adopted two strategies. Most frequently I observed specific activities carried out by a group of children: I would sit with them and, if practical, play with them or observe what they were doing, and later move to another group. Alternatively, I also followed a specific child for a period of time, as they moved from one activity to another. This was a way for me to include children who seemed not to be sufficiently present in my research.

The problem of ensuring equal participation of children in the research was one of the major challenges. Despite my rather good relationships with the children, there were some for whom my presence was a source of greater distress and discomfort than for others. On the other hand, some children were greatly attracted to my presence in the preschool and insisted on spending as much time with me as possible. While I tried to deal tactfully with such situations to ensure that I had enough time and attention for other children, I am aware of the fact that such children are still more visible in my material and text than others. Children who stood out in some ways are also discussed more prominently, for example troublemakers who frequently and explicitly resisted the staff as well as children singled out by the teachers for other reasons, or the most popular and powerful ones who were at the center of attention. This is one of the reasons why in my Preschool A fieldnotes boys are much more prominent than girls (another was their significantly higher number in the group). Despite my attempts to be as conscious as possible of the tendency to concentrate on such children, I am aware of the fact that my research still suffered from a variation of the "Big Man Bias" (Thorne 1990: 104).

## *Interviews and conversations*

In the course of my research I spent a lot of time talking with children. Doing so, I followed principles of pedagogy of listening, such as the openness to difference, to the unexpected, to the Other; putting emphasis on respecting others and therefore taking what they say seriously (Dahlberg and Moss 2005: 100). In this process children proved to be extremely observant and reflexive, capable of pointing to problems they faced and of offering solutions to them.

I learned about their views first of all in the course of informal conversations I held with them during the period of my research. We talked about specific events or situations, children's actions (especially those I did not understand well), their attitudes toward teachers, but also about their lives at home, their families and activities outside the preschool. Some of these talks took place during mini-tours children gave me around the preschool or the playground, when they showed me their favorite spots, toys or pieces of equipment, and told me what they did in a given place. During our conversations children played the role of experts who explained to me what was happening in the institution and why. Although I used our talks as an opportunity to find out about issues that I was particularly interested in or that were not clear to me, I was also open to listening to other stories the children were willing to share with me, even if they did not seem directly related to my research interests. Still, what I was told often served as valuable contextual knowledge, and my informal conversations with children certainly were a means of developing rapport. Obviously, these kind of conversations privileged children who were more outspoken, verbal and accustomed to reflecting on what was happening to them and expressing their views. Significantly, I collected much more informal conversational material in Preschool B, attended by children from academic, middle class families, than in Preschool A attended by children from working class families with lower levels of education. This could point to differences in cultural capital between children in the two institutions. Methodologically, it reveals the need to attend to the fact that specific research methods may favor children from a particular social background.

Throughout the research I also conducted more formal semi-structured interviews with children whose aim was to acquire information concerning the way children perceived their daily lives in the preschools: what they liked and disliked about them, as well as how they imagined an ideal preschool they would like to attend. They were also asked about issues such as rules and regulations they have to obey and the consequences of breaking them, as well as their understanding of categories such as good or bad preschoolers. Recognizing children's right not to talk, or not to talk about unpleasant, threatening subjects, I only interviewed children who were willing to talk to me and stopped the interviews whenever they wanted to do so (cf. Eide and Winger 2005: 77). I often did group interviews, which diminished some of the pressure the children might experience as well as allowed them to stimulate and inspire each other. The children were free to decide who they wanted to be interviewed with and when. Since I wanted them to feel safe and

unconstrained, the interviews took place outside the group room or in a distant part of the playground so that the teachers or other children could not hear what my interviewees were saying. The vast majority of children enjoyed the interviews a lot and insisted on being interviewed more than once. The fact that our conversations were a time for them to move away from the teachers' gaze could certainly contribute to children's fascination with them, but my willingness to listen to them and respect what they were saying was probably not irrelevant.

Some of the interviews were based on children's drawings as a means of facilitating our talks (cf. Graue and Walsh 1998: 114). This was the case with interviews concerning children's ideas about their dream preschool. I invited children to draw such a place and later to tell me about it. This was an attempt to draw on the children's strength as they were quite used to and good at expressing their ideas in the form of drawings, and the pictures children produced made our conversations easier, helping me better grasp their intentions.

In retrospect, I believe my research would have benefited a lot from a wider and more systematic use of more participatory methods. Although the children in general were eager to talk to me and I learned a lot from our conversations, some had difficulty expressing themselves in this way. As a result, some children's views are represented in my research to a much larger extent than those of others, which could have been remedied by the use of other research methods. More extensive use of children's drawings and other artwork (e.g. plasticine models) would have been the simplest solution, yet other elements of, for instance, the Mosaic approach, would have also been of a great help. Given my interest in children's perception of their preschool lives methods such as picture taking and map making are the most obvious examples. Nonetheless, it needs to be emphasized that even having used methods that are relatively little tuned to children's strengths, I succeeded in gathering material that reveals aspects of children's lives in preschool that usually remain unknown to even their parents and teachers.

## The teachers' and institutional perspective – methods

Learning about the professionals' views on the preschool world implied mainly getting to know the rationale for their actions, the difficulties and constraints they faced, and their perception of a preschool teacher's work. This means that I was interested, on the one hand, in a material reality of a

preschool: the basic functioning of the institution (including available resources, spatial arrangements, workload, etc.), and how it influenced teachers' actions. On the other hand, I also attempted to identify the discursive level of the preschool reality which the teachers co-created. I was interested in the way they constructed a "proper" preschooler and their own role as a teacher, as well as how they perceived child-adult relations.

The primary method used to get to know the perspective of professionals working in the preschools was interviews, yet observation and document analysis were also of use.

## *Interviews*

Material from semi-structured interviews proved the most efficient means of reconstructing the teachers' beliefs and ideas concerning preschool education, and of learning about problems they had to handle. Principals in both institutions and the regular group teachers (i.e., those looking after the children on a daily basis, as opposed to outside teachers coming to conduct special activities) were interviewed once or twice (after the first year and at the end of the research). Interviews, lasting between two and three hours, covered topics such as the teachers' understanding of their role and the obligations and responsibilities that went with it, their conceptions of the child and children's appropriate behavior in a preschool, their expectations toward children, parents and educational authorities as well as difficulties they encountered. We also discussed specific preschool arrangements and talked about individual children and some incidents that took place in the preschool which I was particularly interested in. The interviews with principals focused on more general structural dimensions of preschool functioning, but also on the principals' understanding of a good preschool, the teacher's role and their requirements and expectations toward the teachers.

## *Observation*

Observations that I conducted during whole-group, teacher-directed activities were most suitable for reconstructing the teachers' beliefs concerning their own position and role as a teacher, as well as child-adult relations. I concentrated on the ways in which teachers interacted with children, how they positioned themselves in relation to children and how they responded to children's resistance. My focus was also on the construction of a normative

ideal of a proper child/preschooler (but also proper childcare), and therefore I looked at instances of the adults' communicating to children certain norms, including those concerning gender, sexuality and age. They did so employing a wide range of techniques, from messages about what "should" and "should not" be done/said by certain persons in certain situations (i.e., construction of "the normal"), to comparing children and excluding those whose behavior was deemed inappropriate, to imposing norms by means of various forms of physical violence. I was especially attentive to possible differences between the forms these processes took in the two preschools.

### *Document analysis*

In order to find out about the context in which preschool teachers functioned and which might have influenced their actions, I analyzed a number of documents according to which the preschool institution was organized. I included official documents produced by the Ministry of Education and the local municipality, as well as internal preschool documents, such as bylaws, mission statements, curriculum plans or educational programs. I was most interested in reconstructing underlying discursive assumptions concerning the role of the preschool as well as the conception of the teacher and the preschoolers, as well as in identifying objective, material constraints that the teachers faced (e.g. resulting from regulations concerning the group size or allocated resources).

I consider observation and interviewing complementary in a double sense. On the one hand, combining them served the purpose of triangulation (which seems necessary given frequent discrepancies between children's and teachers' actions and declarations); on the other, interviews were an opportunity to inquire about the meaning of certain behaviors and events. This was especially important in the case of the teachers, some actions of whom left me confused and in need of clarification. Analysis of documents, in turn, allowed me to get to know details of preschool functioning and ideology that organized daily life in the institutions (values, norms, expectations toward children and teachers), thus helping me establish a general context of specific practices as well as to understand teachers' actions and discourses.

# Establishing my position as a researcher

Entering the preschools, I established an identity that did not exist there (Adler and Adler 1998: 23). I was an adult, yet I did not bear the same responsibility for the kids' lives and well-being as other adults did; I did not punish the kids or tell them to do anything. I consciously positioned myself this way and made continuous efforts not to be perceived by the children as yet another teacher in the room. My objective was to establish a friendly relationship with them based on respect and trust, which I considered a precondition for their sharing their experiences and thoughts with me. Practically, this meant that I took a position that can probably be best described as Fine and Sandstrom's (1988: 17) friend's role, characterized by the lack of authority and positive affect. I invited children to address me by my first name and allowed them to behave toward me in ways that they most likely would not have behaved toward other adults. I tried to approach Mandell's (1988) "least-adult role," yet I soon learned it was neither possible nor fully desirable. First, the children never seemed to forget about me being an adult enjoying a rather different status and rights going with it than they had. This in itself can be considered quite a valuable piece of data, indicating the strength of age-based hierarchies in Polish culture. Second, my interest in the teachers' perspective meant that I did not avoid interacting with them, while the least-adult role appears most appropriate when the focus is predominantly on children's own relationships and activities they structure themselves. Finally, it has been observed that positioning oneself as an adult (albeit friendly and coequal) gives a researcher an opportunity to reflect on child-adult differentiation in context (i.e., reflecting on when differences matter and when they do not) which serves as an additional source of data (cf. James, Jenks and Prout 1998: 183). It also makes it possible for a researcher to behave in ways atypical of children, for instance to ask ignorant questions[15] (*ibid.*, also Wyness 2005: 190 on Corsaro's concept of "foreignness" as a gateway to children's worlds).

For a long time my ambiguous status was a source of confusion for some children who were sometimes uncertain about what to expect from me and what my position was. As I found out, several had great difficulties addressing me by my first name, claiming that it was "weird" or that they felt better when

15 Interestingly, such a position sometimes caused children's suspicion as they doubted I really did not know about some issues and could even get irritated with my ignorance.

they called me "Ms Kasia." The process of negotiating my status lasted for the whole period of my research as on a regular basis I reminded the children that they were free to use my first name and that I was not their teacher. This also meant that I usually tried to refrain from solving their disputes and intervening in conflicts. I did intervene, however, in situations I considered dangerous (e.g. when a fierce fight would break out while none of the teachers were around) or, several times, trying to support a child who was bullied. I sometimes comforted children who needed it as well. I did not find it problematic to be considered a friendly, supportive adult. However, I wanted to avoid being perceived as a teacher as this would entail positioning myself in relation to children in a clearly hierarchical way and creating a distance that would make open interactions with children difficult. Significantly, children themselves negotiated my status. Some would correct others who called me "Ms Kasia" by saying: "This is Kasia, not Ms Kasia" or would stop others' attempts to enlist my help in conflict situations by reminding them that I was "not a teacher, [I was] Kasia."

The teachers' reactions added to the confusion. In the first place, they were constantly eager to construct my status as a respectable adult. They insisted on the children addressing me "Ms Kasia" and often corrected them if they used my first name (this changed with time, especially in Preschool B). They constructed my status of an adult using other means too. When one of the kids in Preschool A tapped me at my arm, the teacher reprimanded her, saying: "Is she a friend for you? You've got your friends here", and pointed to other kids. Preschool B teachers and an aide insisted on me sitting at the teachers' desk at lunch rather than joining the kids. More significantly, the teachers sometimes tried to use me as a disciplinary instrument. Since I was openly taking notes, they would warn the children that I was watching them and would write down names of those who misbehaved. They would make a similar comment when they had to temporarily leave the room and I stayed with the kids as the only adult. Such incidents went against my objectives as they worked to put me precisely in a position I intended to avoid. As a result, in some cases I openly and immediately resisted (like I did when a teacher said to children who were supposed to lie quietly on the carpet, "Ms [Kasia] is watching you and noting down who behaves themselves, and who does not"). In other cases, I reassured the children later that I was not interested in whether they behaved or misbehaved and that I did not intend to pass on such information to the teachers.

Despite all the difficulties, I succeeded in establishing a good rapport with most children in both institutions. I was always welcomed warmly when I came to the preschool; several children usually wanted me to sit at their tables at lunch or to be their pair on a trip. This was facilitated by my special position that allowed me to refrain from disciplining children, yet as important was the fact that I always had time for the children (as the aide in Preschool A mentioned, having seen me surrounded by several children who wanted to tell me something: "You like Ms Kasia, don't you? I am not surprised at all. Ms Kasia has the time for you"), wanted to listen to them and treated them with respect. My openness, interest and responsiveness were a precious resource given the typical clearly demarcated child-adult division as well as tight schedules and large groups that made it difficult for the teachers to find enough time to listen to individual children's stories.

My relationships with the adults were more complicated and differed from one preschool to another. I had a relatively close relationship with the main teacher in the Preschool B group – we were on a first-name basis, we spoke casually and she went as far as to say by the end of my research that it would feel strange without me in the preschool. The distance between Preschool A teachers and me was significantly larger. This could result in part from the fact that while I generally identified with teaching methods and approach to the children in Preschool B (especially with those adopted by the main group teacher), I had great difficulty accepting those typical of Preschool A, while not feeling comfortable discussing them openly with the teachers. My good relationships with the children, many of whom were openly critical of their teachers and resisted them, seemed to contribute to the tension. While I never experienced rejection, I was never sure how willing the teachers were to have me in the room and I was rarely at ease in their presence. Even though I made a conscious effort to keep my emotional attitudes from influencing the way I perceived and recorded what I saw in the preschools, I do not deny that as a result of my differing relations with the adults in the two preschools and my view of their practices, I could be more prone to notice some incidents than others.

## Further ethical considerations

Doing ethnographically inspired research implies a great deal of close interactions with people participating in research over an extended period of

time, which can result in a strong attachment between the researcher and the participants. Intense bonds that develop in the course of the research prevent the researcher from maintaining a distant, neutral stance; instead, the researcher becomes part of the setting and starts having certain responsibilities toward research participants. Having spent three years in the preschools, I became deeply involved in the preschool lives of the children and, to a lesser degree, the teachers. My emotional immersion in the preschools proved to be one of the crucial causes of ethical dilemmas I experienced during the course of my research. This was particularly striking in Preschool A, where my close ties with the kids clashed with my exposure to practices which I considered detrimental to the children's well-being.

One of the major ethical dilemmas I faced during my research in Preschool A had to do with discovering things I did not necessarily want to know, i.e., the amount of violence taking place there. Despite the strong presence of violence in society, acts such as shouting at children, dragging them or occasionally spanking them are deemed inappropriate in the preschool context, and an assumption tends to be made that they do not happen. Yet, preschools, like other educational institutions, to some extent are closed institutions where children and staff spend time on their own, having minimal contact with outsiders. Little is known about preschool day-to-day functioning. Preschool B principal talked about it in terms of trust: while signing up their children, parents need to trust the teachers that they will provide their children with the best care possible; constant supervision (e.g. in the form of a webcam) would run counter to such a principle. In the context of my research, however, this meant that I observed practices which I suspected were unknown to other outsiders, including parents. I had to therefore face the question as to what to do with the secret, troublesome knowledge I was acquiring during the course of the research.

The issue became all the more complex in the light of conflicting interests. First, there was the children's well-being, which I considered potentially threatened by the adults' behavior toward them. Feeling responsible for the children – as a result of both the awareness that I was possibly the only witness, and because of my close relationships with the children – I felt obliged to act on the knowledge I gained. At the same time, however, I sensed I had certain obligations toward the teachers. I knew they trusted me, and reporting their actions would be an act of betrayal. During the course of my research my focus changed and I became more interested in the teachers' actions than I had originally intended. Still, convinced that I paid

attention mostly to the children, the teachers seemed safe in my presence, as if entirely invisible. The fact that I refrained from confronting them directly about violence in the preschool could have easily contributed to their attitude. Moreover, as my research proceeded, I grew increasingly aware of the fact that the teachers' violent behavior is not an outcome of their bitterness, but rather of their struggling with structural arrangements conducive to such a way of acting. Overworked, tired, stressed and deprived of support necessary in handling difficult situations, they often appeared incapable of coping successfully with the challenge of looking after a group of 25 children. Their violent outbursts only added to their frustration as they were fully aware of the fact that their actions departed from what was expected of them.

Finally, the question of the most efficient strategy arose. As other research indicated, the problem of violence in educational institutions was not confined to the preschool where I carried out my study. Moreover, my observations made it clear that inadequate structural solutions were at the core of the problem, rather than incompetent individual teachers. Taking action on the level of a specific preschool, while possibly beneficial to individual children, would have probably had a limited influence on the broader structural level, especially if in consequence I would have been refused the right to complete my research. The decision not to address directly the problem of violence in the course of my research may be perceived as an act of avoidance verging on cowardice, yet I made it with the hope of facilitating a structural change by bringing to light some of the most disturbing practices and, in particular, circumstances that made them possible. Nonetheless, the feeling of failing the children and betraying the adults accompanied me throughout the research process.

The issues discussed above can be phrased in terms of costs and hoped-for benefits of research (Alderson and Marrow 2004). The question to be asked now is who benefited from my research. What did it mean for the children who participated in it? They enjoyed the presence of a friendly adult who was interested in their lives and willing to listen to them, but, as Alderson and Marrow (2004: 36) emphasize, to be a good listener is not the purpose of research. Did they benefit from the research in a long run, for instance by becoming more self-confident, capable of resisting injustice or learning to interact differently with an adult? These are questions I am not able to answer. The costs and benefits for the teachers are also problematic. Although none of them expressed it openly, it is possible that at least some of them experienced my presence as burden. They might have felt exposed and

vulnerable, especially when engaging in actions commonly considered inappropriate. At the same time, some of them revealed that when discussing specific situations with me or reading draft versions of my articles, they started reflecting on their own practices and realized that there could be other ways of acting that might be more beneficial for the children and themselves. There also remains the issue of the benefits of my research project for other children and teachers. Alderson and Morrow (2004: 39) warn that "researchers can justify any research by claiming huge hoped-for benefits." While not questioning the validity of this observation, I still dare to hope that my research that gives account to fairly obscure aspects of children's lives and exposes concealed systemic deficiencies, can make a difference and contribute to changing the experiences of future preschoolers and their teachers.

## Summary

The aim of this chapter was to discuss main issues pertaining to the conceptualization of my research project. In the first part I outlined the theoretical framework, briefly presenting main theoretical inspirations and concepts of importance for my analysis. Next, I discussed the specific problems that emerge in research with children. In the third part I presented the research settings, including the rationale behind the decision to choose the specific sites. The central part of the chapter concerned the issue of carrying out research from multiple perspectives. I elaborated on the perspectives I attempted to take throughout the research (of the child, the staff and the researcher) and their ontological, epistemological and methodological consequences. In the remaining part of the chapter I discussed the process of establishing my position as a researcher in the field, as well as the primary ethical problems that emerged during the research.

# 3. (Re)constructing a misfit. Preschool and normalization

This chapter is a case study of one Preschool A child, a boy named Harcon. Certainly the most visible and talked about in the group, he immediately captured my attention. He also wanted me to notice him. I met him soon after I started my research. The children were about to take a nap, and he wanted me to sit next to his bed and hold his hand. He would protest every time I made the slightest attempt to leave. During my subsequent visits to the preschool he often tried to be as close to me as possible: he would ask me to sit at his table or wanted to sit on my lap, or insisted that I be his partner and hold his hand when the group was going for a trip. He clearly called for my attention.

Harcon's visibility stemmed from his intense and often violent relationships with grown-ups and children. According to the teachers, he was the child who was the most disobedient and difficult to work with in the group. He had his views and preferences and was not willing to compromise. He objected and resisted when the adults tried to get him to do something he did not like. His resistance moved beyond simply saying "no": he fought, he shouted, he swore. The teachers clearly did not know how to deal with him and their helplessness often led them to use various forms of violence against him. Over the course of almost three years I spent in the preschool I observed how Harcon changed from a child who misbehaved perhaps slightly more than other children in the group to one who resisted most of the time and nearly constantly engaged in fierce arguments with the adults and the other kids.

I was preoccupied with his case. In many ways, Harcon was unlike the other children. His family situation was special: he was abandoned by his mother (who, apart from rejecting him emotionally, lived abroad so he was able to see her only a few times a year for a short period of time) and was raised by his grandmother. In the teachers' view, but also in the opinion of a psychologist he was referred to, the lack of maternal love and care, as well as distorted bond formation processes he experienced in early childhood, were to account for his behavioral problems. Moreover, unlike other children, he did not show inhibition, thus effectively undermining the teachers' construction of the child and child-typical behavior. His use of offensive

language (more and more common as he was getting older), also in reference to the teachers, and refusal to show respect to adults posed a serious challenge the teachers could not always deal with successfully. As a result, his relationships with the adults were different from those of other kids. He was constantly at the core of the attention of the teachers who tried to discipline him, negotiate with him, please him or ignore him. Their focus on him rendered me even more interested in him. This, however, entailed turning my attention to the teachers as well. It was precisely because of the entanglement of the teachers' actions and his behavior that I found his case so captivating. It seemed apparent to me that, to an extent, Harcon's behavior was a response to the adults' ways of positioning themselves and the children, and their specific manner of functioning as teachers. Very close and incessant surveillance of children's actions, detailed planning and directing of their activities and insistence on being positioned and perceived as an authority who is always in charge provoked resistance. Most of the children, socialized well enough to obey and respect adults, were able to conform. The more independent, unruly ones, of whom Harcon was a prime example, protested and fought.

Harcon and his relationships with the adults are so special and worth attention for the reason of their ambiguity. On the one hand, his case was extreme and the teachers' reactions he prompted were rather unique. In what follows, I discuss a range of techniques the teachers used to construct Harcon as a misfit, an improper and incompetent preschooler who should not be there at all, and to cope with him. An image that may emerge from this analysis is one of the teachers as authoritarian and abusive adults who seem unconcerned with the children's well-being. It needs to be emphasized, however, that this is only part of the picture. The teachers' interactions with children were frequently based on care, support or willingness to help. They did attend to children's needs and made sure they felt well. I saw the teachers hug the children, hold friendly conversations with them or play with them. Yet I also saw them get involved in rather violent, often drastic interactions with some of the kids, Harcon being one of them. The case study of Harcon that follows emerges from my concern with such situations and my burning need to understand what made them possible.

However, Harcon's exceptionality is only one aspect of the case. It could also be claimed that the actions that he and the teachers undertook as they interacted were only an intensified form of the teachers' and other children's casual, everyday behavior. Spanking children was not a common teachers' way

of interacting with them, but preventing them from moving or dragging them to a certain spot could be observed on a fairly regular basis. In a similar vein, Harcon was probably the only child who could say in the teacher's face that she was stupid and he did not like her, but many other children revealed exactly the same feelings to me in secret. Only Harcon was capable of pulling a chair a teacher was about to sit on and making her fall on the floor, but other children were as willing to ridicule and humiliate the teachers in a somewhat milder manner as he was. In this way his case can serve as an magnifying glass, showing particularly clearly some of the practices that took place in the preschool.

As Canguilhem (1991) emphasizes, the normal can only be established by reference to the pathological, to that which breaks the order. The meaning and function of the norm is derived from the fact that there exists something that does not conform to it. Therefore, he argues, the relationship between the normal and the pathological, or the abnormal, is paradoxical. Logically, the abnormal comes as second (as a linguistic negation of the normal). Empirically, however, it comes first. Disorder becomes contained by regulations that come to be established as the norm. Harcon's case illustrates this process well. He, as "the pathological," was used by the teachers as a reference point to construct the ideal of a proper, "normal," preschool child. I follow a similar path. The analysis of the ways in which Harcon functioned and was positioned in the group makes it possible for me to reconstruct the conception of the incompetent, "pathological" preschooler, which in turn serves as a background for elaborating on the preschool ideal of the normal child. I begin with the analysis of Harcon's case because it was so striking and outrageous, but also because it was at the core of life at Preschool A. I do it, even though I am aware that the usual Polish preschooler's life is rather different from Harcon's. The exceptionality of his case serves as the first step into the investigation of a more ordinary preschool life: of other children in this particular institution, as well as of children in the other preschool where I carried out my research, and where nothing comparable took place. I move therefore from the extreme to the (more) regular, from the pathological to the normal – all while trying to comprehend what happened in the preschools and why.

In this chapter I reconstruct the teachers' ways of dealing with Harcon as an attempt to establish power positions. His case illustrates how child-adult dynamics function in the context of an educational institution. It also makes it possible to challenge the conceptions of both children as powerless victims of

adult socialization practices, and adults as those in control of the preschool reality. It reveals the teachers' attempts to overcome their apparent sense of powerlessness by resorting to both legitimate and illegitimate means. However, it also exposes dramatic shortcomings of an education system that fails to provide both specific institutions in general and teachers in particular with sufficient resources to handle exceptional children who in various ways and for various reasons do not meet educational or behavioral standards (or are so perceived/positioned). For this reason, the analysis I undertake in this chapter needs to be read with attention paid to the specific context in which the preschool and the teachers functioned, as discussed in Chapter 1. In Chapter 10 I return to the issue of the structural and systemic circumstances under which the teachers worked, and present their views on some of the practices that took place in the preschool. Harcon's case should be perceived in a broader context of the particular preschool he attended as well as Polish education system and child-adult relations.

## Harcon and everyday life in a preschool group. Normalization and stigmatization

From the very beginning of my research I got to know that Harcon was a "troublemaker," and quite a shrewd one. On one of my first visits, after he had told a teacher that he did not like her, I was informed by one of the adults that Harcon was very nice and pleasant when in the company of strangers, but after having spent some time with a given person, he would become terrible. In the months to follow I was to frequently be informed – by the teachers and other adults, as well as by the children – that he did not fit, that he was not a "good," "proper" preschooler, and that he was a bad, misbehaving boy. Everyone knew that. What follows is a reconstruction of the process of collective learning about Harcon's status – and, simultaneously, of producing it. I begin with a discussion of the situations that gave rise to conflicts between Harcon and the teachers.

### Violence

One of the main reasons why teachers punished Harcon was his involvement in various kinds of violent and aggressive behavior. Instances of his hitting other children, biting them, pulling their hair or violently taking away their

possessions could be frequently observed. While he was not the only child in the preschool who engaged in such actions, rather uniquely, Harcon behaved aggressively toward the adults as well. Resorting to violence, Harcon broke two important preschool rules, the first being an explicit official ban on fights among children, and the second, an assumption – not openly expressed, but implicitly understood by everyone in the preschool – that teachers were not to be hit.

A few aspects should be emphasized here. First, Harcon appeared to be used to considering violence as a possible and acceptable way of solving conflicts, and some kind of corporal punishment as a natural consequence for improper behavior. The following conversation is rather instructive in this respect:

> Niko shows Harry a book that someone has taken away from him and damaged it. Harcon: And now your mom will kill you, right?
> KG: Why would his mom kill him?
> Harcon: You don't understand. If something that belongs to his mom gets damaged or broken, then she'd have to kill him...
> KG: Do you mean that if someone damages or breaks someone else's thing, they have to be killed for that?
> Harcon: No, they'll be spanked on the ass.
> KG: But maybe they've damaged it by accident... Would they get spanked then as well?
> Harcon: Yup.
> KG: Do you often get spanked?
> Harcon shakes his head.
> KG: How do you know then that this is what happens?
> Harcon: Because when I smash or damage my grandma's thing, she can spank me on my ass. (Preschool A, 5.12.2006)

Although it remains uncertain whether Harcon spoke from his own experience, undoubtedly inflicting physical violence as a response to misbehavior remained an acceptable option for him. Importantly, I heard similar accounts from other children as well, which may indicate that violence against others was a permanent feature of their environment, and as such, could be used as an immediate resource in their interactions. In a way, then, the fact that Harcon (and other children) resorted to physical violence was nothing unusual.

Second, while the children were usually punished for violent behavior toward others, violence as a feature of interaction was not entirely condemned in the preschool. On the one hand, it was used by the teachers themselves – a point I will discuss in more detail later. On the other, the adults sometimes

openly encouraged children to use it as a response to Harcon's acts, as the following examples illustrate:

> Harcon stings Ola's buttock with a finger. She turns back to him with an angry face and a clenched fist. Ms Małgorzata sees it and says: "Ola, I've told you. You've got the right to fight back. If I were you, I'd hit him back." (Preschool A, 16.05.2007)

> Harcon slaps Ronaldino across his face. Ms Zosia: "Ronaldino, has he slapped you across the face? Slap him back. Slap him back, I allow you! Slap him back!" Ronaldino clearly does not want to do that. (Preschool A, 21.03.2007)

As the above situations show, the children were taught explicitly that in some contexts violence may be a legitimate response to certain behavior[16], and they had learned this lesson. However, the teachers' actions appeared fairly inconsistent: while punishing a child for inflicting violence against others, it was precisely violence that they encouraged. Yet, according to a general understanding shared (or deemed to be shared) by everyone in the preschool, violence was something unacceptable and inherently wrong. As a consequence, by allowing the children to use it against Harcon, the teachers also constructed him in a specific way: as a child whose behavior is so incorrect (and who himself is so bad) that an act considered intolerable under usual circumstances may be appropriate in his case. This "negative exceptionality" appears to be one of the most persistent features in the teachers' and children's construction of Harcon.

## "Unconventional" behavior

Besides being punished for violent behavior, Harcon was also admonished for actions that, while not inherently negative, were considered inappropriate in a preschool context.

> Harcon comes back to the room, goes to his place, takes his chair, turns it to the side and sits on its side edge. A teacher from another group enters. Ms

16 This can also be illustrated by a song the children learned and liked a lot. It told a story of a misbehaving kitten that on a regular basis was about to be physically punished by a mother or a father for doing something unacceptable (damaging clothes etc.), but every time a grandmother would come to rescue it. The children took a great joy in singing this melodic song about a cat which was about to be hit with a belt.

> Małgorzata draws her attention to Harcon and says in an ironic voice: "Please see how a normal child behaves." (Preschool A, 9.01.2007)

> Harcon splits a hard-boiled egg and twists the white around his finger. The aide looks at hims and says: "And see what he is like. How he presents himself. Look what he's doing to that egg." (Preschool A, 22.09.2006)

> Harcon climbs up the table. Ms Małgorzata: "Hey, have you gone mad? Walking on a table?" (Preschool A, 21.06.2007)

The main reason why the boy was criticized in the above cases was the discrepancy between his behavior and the adults' conception of a "normal child's" proper behavior. Harcon's actions deviated from the pre-established convention and as such were pointed to and utilized to stigmatize the boy as someone who is "abnormal" and does not fit.

## Resistance

One could claim that considering the incidents quoted above as instances of stigmatization of a child is too far-reaching. The role of the preschools, like other educational institutions, is to prepare children to function in a given society, which involves teaching them norms and regulations that organize it. The national preschool basic curriculum makes it clear, stating that "inculcating children with socially acceptable behavior" (*Podstawa programowa* 2007: 4) is one of the objectives of a preschool. Walking on tables or slapping other people are generally not considered socially acceptable and therefore it is understandable that Harcon was punished for such acts. However, he was also punished for actions whose social unacceptability is more disputable, namely for resisting and disobeying the teachers. Again, he was not the only child to do that, but he was exceptionally persistent in following his ideas, even at the risk of being punished. What is particularly important is that his resistance often amounted to undermining the teachers' authority and threatening the existing power balance in a group in such a way that the adults' dominance ceased to be unquestionable.

The teachers tended to present Harcon as a child who they had the most problems with because he "did not obey and walked his own path." In some instances, "walking his own path" meant that he disrespected other children's wishes and interrupted their play. Very often, however, his resistance meant a refusal to participate in teacher-directed activities or to follow the adults' orders, like in the following incident:

> The teacher tells the children to stand in a circle; they are to walk around and then to start exercising. They first show their fingers, one by one, and then lift up their arms and drop them down. The teacher gives them the rhythm: slow, slow, fast, fast. Harcon lies on the floor. He repeats rhythmically, along with the teacher, "pussy, pussy, pussy." (Preschool A, 22.11.2006)

On the one hand, this incident was an act of refusal to perform a teacher-directed activity that, to my knowledge, most of the children found rather unenjoyable, especially when compared to the free play they had done earlier. Harcon probably did what many other, "better adjusted" children would have liked to do, but did not dare, even though in principle (but not in everyday practice) they had the right not to participate. On the other hand, however, he also violated an explicitly set regulation: the children were not supposed to use offensive language. Harcon frequently broke this rule, and took pride and joy in it. In this case using a swear word could possibly be understood as the most advanced and far-reaching expression of his disgust and rejection of both the activity proposed, and the whole concept of a "good" preschooler.

The adults' responses to such acts of disobedience differed: sometimes they allowed Harcon (or other children who behaved alike) not to participate, at other times they insisted that the children do what they are told to do, which in Harcon's case often resulted in an argument or a fight. Yet, it could be claimed that his resistance was entirely legitimate and served as a reminder of the preschool's basic rules: the preschool, according to its mission, was supposed to "treat every child as an individual and as a subject, and … make him/her feel loved, accepted and happy." The fact that Harcon was often punished for attempting to follow his own interests reveals the discrepancy between the official policies (or the educational ideology) of the institution and its actual daily practice.

Harcon's resistance often took some form of rule breaking. Sometimes he would sneak out of the room or would bring his own toys to the room when he was supposed to keep them in the changing room. In some cases his acts of breaking a rule revealed its absurdity, such as when he was reproved for looking under a lid to see what kind of dish the kids would get for lunch. Such incidents, while used by the teachers to re-emphasize his status of a disobedient child and a troublemaker, did not have a significant influence on the power relations in the group. However, and most interestingly, his resistance could also lead to undermining the adults' authority. He was the one who would openly say that an activity suggested by a teacher did not appear to be worthwhile, as in this incident:

> The children are singing. Ms Zosia: "And now the girls will sing with me, and the boys will look which one sings the best." Harcon: "And why would we care about it?"[17] (Preschool A, 22.06.2007)

He could also question the validity of the adults' statements and declaration, for instance by doubting they would follow through on their threats. The following situation (that I in a way provoked) is a very obvious example, but he often initiated similar incidents himself:

> I ask Harcon if he thinks that the teacher really means it when she says that kids who don't eat won't go out to the playground. Harcon: "No, she's lying". KG: "Then why is she saying this?" Harcon: "I don't know. To cheat everyone. Yes, I know that." He gets up and walks around the room saying: "The teacher's lying. Isn't it so, kids, that the teacher's lying?" Sometimes he stops next to individual children and tells them that the teacher is lying. (Preschool A, 14.05.2007)

Doing so, Harcon spelled out what indeed all the children knew: that the teachers would regularly make threats that they could not possibly execute, for instance for safety reasons. He revealed therefore the falsity of an important instrument utilized by the adults to maintain their dominance and, as a consequence, rendered their dominance itself less unquestionable than it usually was.

Another resistance technique used by Harcon that also served to undermine the teachers' authority was his refusal to treat them as respectable adults. The belief that children should respect adults and be polite toward them was one of the most important dimensions of the non-verbalized preschool ideology. It stemmed from the overriding conviction that children and adults belonged to different (hierarchically positioned) groups, which should be reflected in their interactions. Not surprisingly, therefore, attempts to diminish the teachers' status and to treat them as if they were not respectable adults at all amounted to one of the most popular resistance techniques employed by the children, and Harcon was particularly prone to use it. He would laugh at the adults, ridicule them or make ironic comments about their behavior or appearance. In one of the most extreme cases, he pushed back a chair the teacher was about to sit on and, as a result, she landed

17 Although it is not obvious that precisely this was his purpose, it is quite interesting that Harcon resisted here against one of disciplinary techniques the teachers often employed: making the children compete and ranking them on the basis of their performance. I will discuss this issue in more detail in Chapter 7.

on the floor on her rear – an event that rather drastically undermines the status of a person who attempts to present herself as serious and respectable. Harcon made it clear that being an adult or teacher was not sufficient for being granted respect, and that a hierarchy in which adults occupied dominant positions was not incontestable. The teachers' often violent reactions to his actions leave no doubt about the actual significance and impact of his attempts to threaten existing power relations.

Apart from such basic techniques as those discussed above, Harcon was capable of pursuing much more sophisticated and mature ones. One of the most telling examples is an incident in which the children were to practice a dance. The teacher first said to Harcon, and a few minutes later to another boy (Ronaldino), that they would lead it. However, when the children actually started practicing, it was not obvious any longer that either of the boys would be in the first pair. Harcon started to object and the following conversation ensued:

> Harcon: You said I would lead.
> The teacher: Oh really? Where is your girl to pair with then?
> Harcon: No. I am supposed to dance with Ronaldino.
> The teacher: So find yourself a girl.
> Harcon: No. I am supposed to dance with Ronaldino.
> The teacher says something about the children not listening to her, and that Harcon would not lead, and that "when the teacher speaks, the kids listen."
> Harcon: No, I will not be with a girl.
> The teacher: The boys invite the girls to dance.
> Harcon: I don't want to dance with a girl.
> The teacher: No. You will.
> Harcon (in a very calm voice): I will tell you what you have said. You have said that Ronaldino and Harcon will lead.
> The teacher (in a sharp voice): You talk like crazy, and you don't do what I ask you to do. Did I ask you...
> Harcon repeats that she said he would lead.
> The teacher: Because you don't listen. Start listening to what I say to you.
> Harcon (still very calm): This is what you have said.
> The teacher (in a loud, sharp voice): And will you start listening to me or not?
> Harcon does not respond.
> The teacher goes on explaining: Listen. We'll go around a circle in pairs. A boy, a girl. If he was going to lead, then he wasn't listening to what he was supposed to do.
> Harcon covers his ears with his hands and sits like this for a while. (Preschool A, 21.03.2007)

The shift in power dynamics is particularly striking here. The child is actually correct; he repeats the teacher's instructions – or at least their literal meaning, if not the teacher's intention – and does it in a fairly mature manner, being very calm and self-confident. The teacher, on the contrary, behaves rather differently. Unable to admit that the child is right and that she may be wrong, she loses control and begins to shout at the boy. Ironically, she accuses him of not doing precisely what he is doing. She claims he does not listen to what she says and therefore does not know what to do later, while in fact his words are a clear proof that he has been listening to her very closely and now only wants to do exactly what he has been told to do. Symbolically, then, these two individuals switch their positions and we encounter a mature child behaving in an adult-like manner, and an adult who acts in a rather immature way. Paradoxically, it seems that it is the child, not the adult, who is better suited to be in charge, and the steps the teacher takes may be perceived as rather illegitimate means used to regain control. Shouting is one of them; others are an attempt to reinterpret the situation in such a way as to show that the child failed to do what he was expected to do (talking, not listening to the teacher, not obeying her) or the introduction of new rules, not set explicitly in advance (the requirement that pairs are made up of a girl and a boy). The persistence with which the teacher ignores Harcon's explanations and insists aggressively on her own, incorrect view of the situation, seem to indicate how serious a threat to the existing power structure his behavior must have been.

## The outcome: Harcon, the helpless case

All the situations when Harcon gets in conflicts with the adults and is subsequently punished for his behavior could – and frequently did – serve as a basis for constructing his status of an improper preschooler: disobedient, undisciplined and incapable of following rules and keeping agreements. The teachers emphasized that he acted in a way that was incongruent with what was deemed to be a universally accepted conception of a child. Commenting on the above-mentioned incident when Harcon pushed a chair away from a teacher, she expressed openly that "this is not the behavior of a preschooler." The boy was established not only as a unique, peculiar child who in a way was out of place in a preschool (since his behavior turned him into a "misfit"), but also as someone who cannot possibly change; a helpless, incurable case. The teachers' comments in the following incidents make it clear:

> Weronika is playing with a doll. Harcon approaches her and takes the doll away from her, saying that now he will play with it. Weronika tells the teacher about it, but she says: "I will not do anything more about it, because Harcon will keep going around and taking things away from others." Later on Harcon tries to take away doll shoes that Ola is playing with from her, but she holds them tightly and says in a strong voice: "No, Harcon." The teacher hears it and says, "But you know that he will take it by force from you anyway, because Harcon can't play." (Preschool A, 15.02.2007)

> Following an argument with the teacher, Harcon says that he's taking his fire truck home.
> The teacher: Just go ahead. And don't bring it any more. You've got it at home so play there. You brought it for other kids, you said, and does he keep his word?
> The kids: Nooooo.
> The teacher: He said he brought it for you so that you could play in a different way. Did he let you play?
> The kids: Noooo.
> The teacher [to Harcon]: So, do you keep your word?
> Marcel: He allowed me to play.
> The teacher: Be quiet. Do you keep your word?
> Harcon: I gave it to Marcel.
> The teacher: Only to Marcel.
> Harcon: And Zig-Zag.
> The teacher: If you've brought a toy, we all play with it. (Preschool A, 10.05.2006)

In this act of a public labeling of Harcon as someone who has not acquired one of the basic skills expected from a preschooler (the ability to cooperate and play with other children), the adult in the second example ignores evidence to the contrary (silencing a child who expresses a view that does not support her point) in order to present the boy as someone unreliable and not a good friend. Both teachers pigeonholed him as a child who will insist on wrongdoing because he does not know how to behave otherwise, thus making it impossible both for him and for other children to imagine that he could relate to others in a different manner. In fact Harcon was perfectly capable of collaborating peacefully with others and did so on a regular basis. Yet, in their descriptions of the boy, the adults were suspiciously prone to concentrate on the aspects of his behavior where he deviated from the conception of a proper child. This occurs in the following passage that comes from an interview with one of the teachers:

> And he had to be first. And when he was first, then the rest... who cares about them, only he matters, the others didn't have to participate in games or

> anything. He didn't have to subordinate. And when he had to subordinate and wait for something, he would become ill, literally ill, you could see this. (Ms Małgorzata, Preschool A, interview, 2007)

Yet, the practice of placing Harcon in a fixed category went even further as he was eventually categorized as a medical case and his misbehavior was attributed to his psychological problems that prevented him from having control over his deeds. He was diagnosed as emotionally disturbed as a result of a distorted bond formation process in his early childhood, and in the course of his final year in the preschool he underwent a pharmacological and psychological treatment. His condition then became the primary explanation for his behavior:

> Harcon was the ringleader, even though we would explain that he is sick, that he is a poor boy, that it is beyond his control. The group knew this, but they laughed and provoked him as well. (Ms Zosia, Preschool A, interview, 2007)

Medicalization of the boy's state enhanced the adults' tendency to individualize and de-socialize his case. The preschool staff attributed problems with Harcon's in-group functioning exclusively to him and failed to reflect on the social context of it and on their own educational practices. Nowhere in the course of our interviews did the teachers venture to make a connection between Harcon's resistance and their teaching style that was to a large extent based on tight control, surveillance and detailed top-down planning of children's activities. They expected subordination and obedience from the children which they considered some of the most important characteristics of a competent, proper preschooler. However, as a result of such an approach, children who needed more autonomy and space for cultivating their own ideas could – and did – feel constrained and limited in their freedom. This was certainly Harcon's case. Moreover, he was not socialized to fulfill others' expectations when it was against his own needs and desires. Unlike some of the other children, he also failed to develop somewhat subtler resistance techniques that would not threaten the preschool power structures as such, thus being more acceptable to the teachers. Openly rebellious in the context of an institution that emphasized order and discipline, he could easily be categorized as a misfit.

McDermott (1993) claims that phenomena such as learning disabilities exist only because there are social arrangements that make categorizing someone as suffering from a given condition possible. He analyzes the case of Adam, a child diagnosed as suffering from a learning disability, and argues that

what made such an diagnosis possible was the fact that everyone around the boy was skilled in identifying relevant traits. As he writes, "Everyone knew how to look for, recognize, stimulate, make visible, and, depending upon the circumstances, keep quiet about or expose Adam's problem" (*ibid.:* 287). He claims that Adam was *acquired by* the condition, rather than having it: under specific circumstances he could not help acting in a way that others skillfully categorized as signs of his disability. Harcon's case was similar. He could not have been established as an improper preschooler without the active involvement in this process from his peers, teachers and the education system as such.

## Strategies of coping with an improper preschooler

Outlining the archeology of abnormality, Foucault (2003) points to the figure of an individual to be corrected as one of the sources of the modern abnormal individual. A typical characteristic of such an individual is, paradoxically, his incorrigibility, which, in turn, requires inventing new techniques of improvement, or of "supercorrection," as Foucault (*ibid.*: 58) says. As I have already indicated, Harcon appeared to be such an incorrigible individual. Confronted with him – a child who departed vastly from the conception of a proper preschooler – the teachers had to develop strategies to cope with him. Their strategies aimed not only at correcting him as an individual, but also at maintaining the existing social order in the preschool and keeping the power structure intact. At stake was not only ensuring that Harcon behaved in a way the teachers wanted him to behave, but also that their dominant position remained unquestioned. The strategies were productive in terms of constituting the boy as a subject: in the process of implementing them, the adults were also constantly (re)constructing the boy's status of an improper, incompetent preschooler.

### Teachers' violence

Teachers' violence toward children was probably the most straightforward, extreme and, at the same time, widespread technique used to cope with disobedient children. Generally speaking, violence in preschools is a peculiar phenomenon. Preschools function in a social context where violence against

children is, as I demonstrated in Chapter 1, not condemned and, under certain circumstances, even accepted as a method of a child's upbringing. Still, education professionals are aware of its negative character and therefore, while quietly approving of it, they keep it hidden from outsiders (Siarkiewicz 2000: 102). Harcon's preschool was not an exception in this respect. The principal, asked about teachers' behavior toward children that she disapproved of, said: "I don't like it when a teacher shouts at children, when she raises her voice. And I don't even think of other behavior, as I wouldn't like it if there was anything like shaking or something... I don't even think it is so, but you know, there are different situations, aren't there?" The principal, who must have known that the teachers in her institution resorted to physical violence as a means of maintaining control and discipline, did not want to admit it as she was aware of its illegitimacy. "Different situations" did happen, and Harcon was frequently a part of them. I witnessed incidents in which he was slapped in his face, kicked (in a return for kicking a teacher), dragged by his arm or leg. Needless to mention, the teachers, knowing the inappropriateness of such reactions, tried to explain themselves:

> Maybe what I'm doing is wrong, but I'm a human being too and at some point it's just too much. (Ms Małgorzata, Preschool A, 9.01.2007)

> I couldn't control myself any longer because he kicked and vented his emotions on me. I felt very bad about it. It was the first time I hit a child like that. And I'm telling you, I was suffering a pang of conscience and I felt so very bad about it, but I simply couldn't hold back. I simply couldn't hold back. (Ms Zosia, Preschool A, interview, 2007)

There may be plausible explanations as to why the teachers resorted to such drastic means of punishing Harcon for his misbehavior, mainly stress resulting from highly demanding work conditions (high child-teacher ratio, long working hours or pressure from the authorities to complete all the work in a timely manner) or a feeling of frustration related to their inability to control the child. Yet, it remains clear that by acting toward him in this way, they constructed his status as a person in whose case certain exceptions could be applied and otherwise unacceptable actions performed, thus emphasizing his distinctness from the majority of preschoolers. On a more general level, they also worked to create an environment characterized by violence, which also makes it easier to understand why it was so widespread in the children's interactions.

Using physical violence against Harcon, however, had another important function: it helped to reinstall the power relations he threatened by questioning the teachers' authority. Significantly, acts of violence were often accompanied by direct reminders of who really ruled in the preschool, as in the following example:

> Harcon gets up from his seat and wants to move somewhere else. Ms Zosia tells him to stay where he is, but he refuses. She threatens him with making him go to see the principal. Harcon: "I won't go." Ms Zosia: "Yes, you will. I only keep on hearing complaints about you." They start struggling and finally the teacher drags him out of the room, saying: "You don't rule here. I rule here. Now, out." Harcon cries and resists. The teacher closes the door and we can hear Harcon screaming from behind it. Then he comes back to the room, crying and saying that he won't go to the principal. The teacher repeats that yes, they will go after lunch. Then she forces him to sit at a table, he is still crying and tries to free himself from her hold. Ms Zosia moves his chair with him sitting on it closer to the table. Finally he manages to escape her and sits on the floor in the middle of the room. Ms Zosia repeats few more times that it is she who rules here and they will go after lunch. Harcon says: "No." (Preschool A, 22.09.2006)

The teacher does all she can to leave no doubt that she is the one who can give orders and who has to be obeyed. She is the one who tells children where to sit and what to do, and if they resist, threatens them with punishment. If they refuse to conform, she can always resort to physical pressure to actually force them to do so. The fact that such displays of power took place in public and other children witnessed them seems to confirm further that their objective was not only to temporarily discipline Harcon, but also to remind all kids in the group what the actual power hierarchy was like as well as that the boundary between teachers/adults and children that Harcon effectively attempted to erase, in fact remained intact.

## Accusation (Harcon the scapegoat)

Another common strategy consisted in accusing Harcon of disturbing the group functioning. He was constructed by the teachers – and consequently by the children as well – as someone responsible for rendering the group difficult to work with, as the following excerpts illustrate:

> So for instance Harcon would become hysterical, and we would react to this, and the whole group would go wild as others would immediately show off. Or when I would take Harcon out to the bathroom [when he misbehaved, for

> some kind of punishment – KG], I didn't have anyone to help so the whole room would go crazy. Then when I was back it would take some time to calm them down and I myself wasn't able to calm down right away to do my work as I should. (Ms Malgorzata, Preschool A, interview, 2007)

> He should have left the group. Maybe the group would have got more. He would really get on my nerves sometimes... so I was not able to teach as I had planned... He would interrupt from the very beginning. Maybe he wouldn't interrupt me that much because he happened to like the activities I did, but it was worse with Malgorzata and her art activities, he would refuse; didn't want to do that. And on top of that he would show off in front of the group. This was also exhausting for us. I also lost my nerve once. (Ms Zosia, Preschool A, interview, 2007)

The teachers appear to blame Harcon for all the misfortune talking place in their group, including their own inability to control their emotions and keep their cool. There is no doubt that Harcon's behavior influenced the whole group as some children tried to follow his example and others got into fights with him or were interrupted by him. In a sense the teachers were right claiming that "it would have been a good group" without him. Nonetheless, focusing mostly on the boy's behavior and its immediate impact on the group dynamics, the preschool staff consistently failed to reflect on the broader context of their own practices and work organization as possible reasons for his behavior. For instance, as the second quote above indicates, his disobedience could have been a response to the teachers' attempts to force him to perform tasks he did not enjoy and did not want to undertake. Harcon could have been an excellent excuse for the teachers to critically reconsider their approach to children and teaching. It could be argued that his actions and attitudes were only somewhat more explicit or extreme than, but not dramatically different from, those of other children, and as such could have served as a particularly visible impulse for the adults to reconsider the wider context of preschool organization. Yet, they concentrated on the fact that he did not fit their conception of a proper preschooler and blamed his misbehavior on blemishes of his character and his lack of crucial preschool competences.

Stigmatizing Harcon as a scapegoat happened on a daily basis, with him being accused, as much by the staff as by the children, of damaging toys and other objects, initiating fights even when he was not the instigator, and the like. In one incident, a teacher scolded Harcon when he was bleeding after having been hit in his lip by other child, and accused him of interrupting and provoking others. The children also learned that they could easily point to

Harcon as the one responsible for wrongdoing, and they were as willing as the teachers to present him to me as a troublemaker who interfered with their activities, misbehaved and, in general, was a „bad" or „stupid" child. Acting in line with this perception, Hacron could only reinforce the image of him the adults and children had been constructing.

## Exclusion/marginalization (Disappearing Harcon)

One of the most frequent strategies of dealing with Harcon was ignoring and marginalizing him. This strategy tended to be employed following an argument between him and the adults, and consisted in the adults' explicitly refusing to take notice of him and in their encouraging other children to do so as well. Harcon was to symbolically disappear from the group. Ignoring him was a means whereby the teachers could let him know that they did not care about him, that he was not worthy their attention, and, in fact, that he did not exist as a full-fledged member of the group. In this way the act of ignoring him amounted to excluding him from the group, as in the following examples:

> Ms Malgorzata: "No, Scooby hasn't sat down, Kuba hasn't sat down. Get up everybody." Harcon does not get up. Ms Malgorzata: "I don't take Harcon into account because Harcon does not exist here for me at all. Sit down." (Preschool A, 9.01.2007)

> Ms Malgorzata and the aide repeat several times that the children are not to pay attention to Harcon, and that he is not here. [He is in the room.] (Preschool A, 15.02.2007)

The second example is particularly significant as it shows that not only did the teachers themselves stigmatize Harcon as an excluded child, but also encouraged other kids to do so. No doubt, due to the fairly violent character of his relationships with others Harcon was not a very popular child. Inviting children to express their lack of sympathy for him, the adults could be rather confident about the success of this strategy of pushing him away from the group, as the following, rather striking, incident proves:

> Harcon says that he does not like one child; the teacher responds that he does not like half of the group today, and we'll ask who likes him. The third group teacher is in the room and she joins in by saying: "Those who like Harcon, raise your hands." Nobody raises their hands. The teacher: "Nobody likes you." (Preschool A, 15.02.2007)

In this case, Harcon is actively stigmatized by the teachers and symbolically excluded from the group. To some extent membership in a preschool group was based on the ability to make friends with others; children could have their preferences and play with only some kids (although the ideal was for all the children to get along), but being disliked by all was not really an option. It could be claimed therefore that the teachers staged this situation as a way to punish Harcon in a very painful manner. Knowing that children had issues with him and when given a chance to express their disapproval for him,[18] they would obviously take it, the teachers could expect such an outcome. Harcon was meant to be taught a lesson he could not possibly not learn: Nobody likes him and he is excluded as an improper, invaluable member of the group.

Harcon's exclusion, however, also operated on another level. After he was diagnosed as emotionally disturbed, the teachers expected that he would be transferred to a so-called integrated preschool tailored to children with special needs and requiring particular care and attention. This, however, did not happen, which the teachers regretted a lot. In one incident, the group teacher had a fierce argument with another staff member who accused her of not having made sufficient effort to "throw him away." The discussion in which the other teacher claimed that she "didn't know what [she] would do, but that [she], as a group teacher, wouldn't accept Harcon" took place in the presence of the children, including Harcon himself, and as such, was a public act of reinforcing the boy's status as an improper, undesired preschooler. The adults' recurring expressions of their conviction that, as they put it, "he shouldn't have been here at all this year" and that he should have been "moved away completely from this group" helped to construct the boy as dysfunctional, maladjusted and someone whose place was not in a regular preschool. Similarly, they insisted that he should not go to a regular primary school in the neighborhood because "he will be kicked out of it right away, after a month" and instead he should go to a "special" (integrated) school. Thus, the notion of Harcon's inadequacy for a regular preschool was a powerful instrument of constructing him as a misfit and effectively excluding him from the group of proper, competent preschoolers. Being the "cause of a scandal […] whose corruption is in danger of corrupting the whole flock," Harcon had to be excluded from the group so that the others could be "saved": so that they could learn and develop as proper preschoolers (cf. Foucault 2007).

18 In a usual situation, it was Harcon's behavior that was criticized; both the teachers and the children could say that they did not like the way he acted, but not him as a person.

## Criminalization (Harcon the outlaw)

Practices of marginalization and scapegoating can be summarized as an attempt to criminalize Harcon. In one particularly striking incident the teacher, as a way of disciplining Harcon after he hit another child and refused to eat his lunch, threatened him with calling the police, to which he responded with panic:

> Ms Małgorzata takes her mobile phone and goes to the other room. Harcon, crying, runs to the other room, then comes back, runs behind Zig-Zag's and Ania's chairs, shakes the kids and then clenches his fists in front of Sebastian and stands like this for a while.
> Subaru: And the police will come to pick Harcon.
> Harcon (screaming terribly): I don't want to go to prison!
> The teacher returns to the room and says: The police already know.
> Harcon (crying): Noooo! Leave me alone! I won't be coming to preschool!
> Ms Małgorzata: Sit down here and eat your lunch!
> Harcon: I've eaten!
> Ms Małgorzata: Start to subordinate!
> Subaru pretends he is calling the fire station and the police: Hello the fire station and the police, please come and pick up Harcon because Harcon misbehaves.
> Ms Małgorzata tells the children to leave Harcon alone and not to react to him.
> Subaru: I don't react to Harcon.
> Other children: Me neither.
> Subaru: Harcon, you are for-bi-dden. The po-lice are co-ming now. And the fi-re-figh-ters. I called them to tell them about you. (Preschool A, 12.05.2006)

In this rather extreme example of ruling by evoking fear, the teacher and children collectively turn Harcon into a full-fledged criminal who must be excluded from the group. The teacher, unable to break Harcon's resistance with techniques she would usually use (shouting at him and threatening that she would call his grandmother), resorts to a more efficient means that involves a symbolic mobilization of the state punitive apparatus and results in the boy's utter panic. He fears being taken away by the police and, as he interprets it, imprisoned, without probably understanding well the meaning of this act. Yet, it certainly exemplified for him an immense threat, which could explain his hysterical reaction. A few moments require closer attention, the first being the teacher's statement „Start to subordinate." What exactly did she want to punish Harcon for? Was it the fact that he hit another child, or rather that he did not obey her command when she told him to sit down and eat? Telling him explicitly to start to subordinate may suggest that that latter was

the case, and what she was really bothered by was his resistance. This was not accidental – obedience and subordination were important features of the model of a proper preschooler the teachers seemed to be constructing through their practices. Harcon did not fit such a model, and being aware of that, he could only claim that he would not be attending the preschool any longer. He knew it was not a place for him; he did not belong there. Other kids knew that as well, as demonstrated by Subaru's statement about Harcon being forbidden. Equally significant is the easiness and spontaneity with which Subaru mimicked the teacher, thus enhancing the stigmatization of Harcon. Now it is not only the teacher who believes that Harcon deserves serious punishment inflicted by professionals, but also the children – who also are more than ready to start ignoring him, thus excluding him from the group. Hence, Harcon was turned not only into a medical case, but a criminal as well. By definition, patients and outlaws stand out and, in one way or another, breach some of the norms and rules of their society. Inevitably, so did Harcon.

## Summary

This chapter was an attempt to analyze practices of constructing an improper preschooler. Yet, education is about normalization, and if normalization practices are usually not as conspicuous as in Harcon's case it is only because they are more efficient. It could be argued that Harcon succeeded in seeing through the principles that organized preschool education and efficiently resisted them, thus rendering them so explicit. In the following chapters I discuss normalization on a more general plane of everyday life in both preschools. Normalization works through practices such as those that Harcon was subject to: drawing the boundary between proper and improper behavior (with the use of, for instance, surveillance, assessment or ranking techniques) and transforming or excluding the improper (abnormal), controlling and improving minute details of behavior and bodily functioning. Not necessarily as visible as in Harcon's case, sometimes not even resisted, such practices effectively worked to construct a proper preschooler. In the next chapter I explore this construction in detail, also reflecting on differences between the two preschools, and in Chapters 6 and 7 I analyze the specific technologies that were used to produce it.

# 4. "I don't listen to myself, I only listen to the teacher." Constructing a proper preschooler

Michel Foucault (1979a: 184) maintains that in the 18th century, along with an introduction of a system of universal education, normality as a principle of coercion became characteristic of education. As it does in army barracks, in a factory or in a prison, disciplinary normalization also operates in preschools. Children do not attend preschool simply for the sake of spending time there; in the process of playing and learning they are molded into what is deemed a proper preschooler and a proper child. They get to know that certain types of behavior, skills, competences are desirable, worth attaining and simply "good," while others deserve to be weeded out. They also find out how to tell the former from the latter. All this happens so that they become better: better members of their preschool groups, of their families and peer groups, and eventually of various social groups and society at large. Since "state schooling made self-realization into a central disciplinary objective" (Hunter 1996: 155), they are also supposed to develop as individuals. The norm plays a crucial role here. Norms, rather than excluding or rejecting, are "linked to a positive technique of intervention and transformation, to a sort of normative project" (Foucault 2003: 50). The normative project of education consists then in making children change into proper students (or preschoolers, citizens, etc.), and its basis is a pastoral relationship between the staff in educational institutions and children who attend them. This relationship is based on the principle of the "pastor's" responsibility for the well-being of his "flock" (their salvation), which, in turn, presupposes submission of the latter to their "shepherd" (Foucault 2007, Hunter 1996).

In Foucault's (2007) view, the basis for disciplinary normalization is the development of a specific model to be achieved by those who are subject to the  amounts to practices of normalization. He adds that "the operation of disciplinary normalization consists in trying to get people, movements, and actions to conform to this model, the normal being precisely that which can

conform to this norm, and the abnormal that which is incapable of conforming to the norm" (*ibid.*: 84). The objective of this chapter is to reconstruct such a model of a child that was produced through a range of preschool everyday practices.

Preschool education and care are based on a preconceived ideal of what a child is like and what he or she is supposed to achieve. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999: 43) emphasize that such constructions are productive, i.e., they translate into specific pedagogic practices and approaches. Taking this assumption as a point of departure, I follow a double path. On the one hand, I analyze practices in order to reconstruct the model of a preschool child that informed them. But I am also interested in how the discourse of such a child is made explicit by the teachers and in programs adopted by the institutions. I therefore not only look at what the teachers do, but also at what they say when asked to reflect on a preschool child. Of particular concern to me is whether, and if so, to what extent, these two constructions – stemming from the teachers' practice on the one hand, and their verbalized ideas as well as official preschool documents on the other – are coherent, and if not, what the discrepancies and discontinuities are. Therefore, while trying to reconstruct the normative ideal of a preschooler produced in each preschool, I also look for moments of tensions and raptures, for potential openings that would make other constructions and approaches possible. Finally, I am interested in the similarities and differences between the constructions in the two preschools I researched. Interestingly, their discursive constructions of the (proper preschool) child and the preschool's role differed, but some of their practices were strikingly similar. I begin with the analysis of the conceptions of a child that both teachers' and the two institutions as such held. In the second part I turn to the examination of some specific practices whereby a normative model of a preschooler was produced. The last part is an analysis of the construction of a preschooler as a gendered being.

## Teachers' conceptions of the child

Childcare institutions and educational practices carried out in them are determined by specific conceptions of a child and childhood (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence 1999: 43). Preschool teachers in my research also held such conceptions, both as far as children as a social group, and their specific pupils, were concerned. While sharing some features, constructions that the teachers

in the two institutions had were rather distinct. I argue that they might have been one of the driving forces behind the teachers' differentiated relationships with children as the teachers tried to employ such practices they considered most suitable for the specific model of a child they constructed.

## Preschool A

A general understanding of a normative ideal of a child operating in Preschool A can be derived from official documents produced in the institution. The bylaw reaffirmed the children's right to cultivate their capabilities and interests in accordance with their inborn potential, and the preschool's mission, titled "A Happy Child," claimed that the institution "ensures the all-around, safe and cheerful development of all pupils" and underscored that each child was treated as a subject and on an individual basis. According to this document, the preschool was supposed to make all children feel loved, accepted and happy. Helping children adopt the attitude of openness toward others, the world and life in general, as well as creating conditions in which children could develop their "unique personalities" were also presented as the preschool's tasks. Desired skills and qualities that children should acquire were summarized in a Graduate Profile, according to which,

> [a] preschool graduate:
> - Can present himself
> - Acts independently
> - Is courageous, outgoing, resourceful
> - Can abide by generally accepted moral and social norms
> - Is kind and tolerant
> - Is creative
> - Is communicative
> - Can cope with difficult situations
> - Is prepared to play social roles (a member of a family, peer group, class, local community).

An image that emerges from these official documents is one of a child who is simultaneously self-responsible, independent, inventive and capable of collaborating with others and following regulations: a good member of various social groups. Significantly, when asked about their goals in teaching children, the teachers emphasized interpersonal relations and successful group functioning:

> First of all, so that the child has no problems with interactions with another person, that is another child, so that they are not afraid of children, of adults. (Ms Małgorzata, Preschool A, interview, 2007)

> Perhaps the most important thing is that children have a sense of safety, that they don't feel lost, can find their personality in a group, can open up toward other people; so that the children can express their emotions toward other people or children. (Ms Zosia, Preschool A, interview, 2005)

However, when asked to describe the children they taught, Preschool A teachers pointed to rather different characteristics. They underscored the fact that they worked with a group that was difficult to control, in which many children were disobedient and had emotional and learning disorders, the consequence of which was the unpredictability of their behavior and related potential safety risks. They emphasized the fact that several kids came from poor, single-parent families, often struggling with alcoholism; that they experienced rejection by their closest relatives and were not prepared for successful functioning in a group. The connection they drew between the children's economic background and their behavior was also evident. When describing the group in the final year, when its composition changed significantly, one of the teachers said that the children who had left were those of parents who did not pay (i.e., who for economic reasons were exempted from all or part of the fee), the most aggressive ones. The children, in their view, had not been provided with sufficient knowledge of the rules of proper behavior, and they were used to resisting, breaking norms and regulations, and extorting. Such a perception of the children resembles closely what James, Jenks and Prout (1998: 10) identify as the "evil child." In this model, "evil, corruption and baseness" were assumed to be main features of a child that needed to be "exorcised by programmes of discipline and punishment" often directed at children's bodies. Surveillance of children, constraining them and imposing norms and regulations on them – as well as punishing them for breaking these – were the teachers' practical response to the identified unruliness of children. This is clearly illustrated in Ms Zosia's following comment:

> I am constantly so tense because I don't know what these kids may come up with. You wouldn't move one step away, you constantly watch them, because you don't know what each of them could do. And during free play it is even more so... They have, everyone knows, those interests, but for us, the caretakers, it is even more stressful, because you have to watch them even

> more closely. During the organized play you just control it all, but here it is more unpredictable. (Ms Zosia, Preschool A, interview, 2005)

The image that emerges from Ms Zosia's account is that of a child who cannot be trusted, who is unreasonable and incapable of acting in a safe manner. As a result such children need to be closely controlled and even though their own interests are recognized, they have to be sacrificed for the sake of the children's own and others' safety and the maintenance of order. Not surprisingly, both Preschool A teachers pointed frequently to the risk of children destroying their toys, messing up and hurting themselves or each other if allowed to play freely and unsupervised.

Furthermore, the teachers' discourse drew heavily on the child-adult distinction, as if responding to the belief that children need socializing and guidance (Mayall 2002). As Ms Małgorzata emphasized,

> We have to teach those children, we have to give them a lot of opportunities to learn, to get introduced to the adults' world. ... We have to give them different possibilities, bits of everything, so that they have as many possibilities as possible and as many tips they could use in life as possible. (Ms Małgorzata, Preschool A, interview, 2007)

Here the child appears to be lacking in skills, knowledge, capabilities – very much like what Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999: 44) label "Locke's child." What dominates in such a perception of a child is the conviction of the necessity of preparing a child for the adult life (providing a child with "tips") by filling in the empty vessel which the child is. Those who are responsible for doing so are the more experienced, knowledgeable and "complete" ones, i.e., the adults. As Ms Małgorzata explained, a child "is a human being who we direct so that it develops, grows and becomes an adult personality that could later direct itself." She makes a clear distinction between adults who are capable of governing themselves and children who require direction, thus reinforcing the hierarchical order and its typical model of a passive, incompetent child. Thus, the children appear here to be much more "becomings" than "beings" (James, Jenks and Prout 1998: 207); the point of reference is not their current status, but who they are to turn into in the future. However, drawing on the child-adult dichotomy, as visible in the teachers' discourse, is not without consequences. Cannella (1997: 34-36) points out that in this process children's knowledge is denied or, at best, considered deficient. Adults have the right to decide what knowledge is appropriate for children and to control children's access to it. Furthermore, as

a result of the dichotomous perception of children and adults, children are implicitly subjugated and constructed as objects of control (*ibid.*). The consequence of such a construction of power is, as Cannella (*ibid.*: 37) claims, "the generation of total power for those who are created as 'adults'."

The necessity to educate, socialize and contain children emerged also from the Preschool A principal's account. When discussing the preschool's role, she pointed to the need for teaching children skills related to taking care of themselves: being able to put on and take off their clothes and to fold them, as well as to keep order. She also emphasized the importance of providing children with intellectual stimulation:

> [The teachers should] stir interest in a certain subject area, so that the child becomes engaged in it and enjoys doing it, and also for the parent to understand that this is what the child is interested in. And this is beautiful, because if children have their own interests, they won't escape to some kind of a social group, they won't be interested in this. (Preschool A Principal, interview, 2007)

Providing children with stimulation so that they can choose something they find interesting to follow appears to be presented here as rather instrumental: a means of preventing a child from becoming a member of some kind of a negatively valued peer group. This points to an image of a child as someone who should be restrained and protected as they may otherwise choose to follow the wrong path. Indeed, as James, Jenks and Prout (1998: 11) point out, one of the concerns of the evil child discourse is "that these evil children should avoid dangerous places lest they fall into bad company, establish bad habits, develop idle hands." Discovering one's passion and following it is a means to avoid wandering into such dangerous places and its consequences.

Such an approach was reflected in the principal's view of appropriate teaching methods. She referred to them as "old methods," juxtaposing them with "active methods" (which were at the same time recommended in the preschool's scheme of work):

> Such [old] methods are also good in order to discipline a group, because those active, creative methods, they sometimes result in children's anxiety, irritation; they sometimes don't know what to do, they run... There is no discipline, even internal. The activities that are more ordered – now we do this, then we move on to that – they discipline more. (Preschool A principal, interview, 2007)

A clear focus here is on discipline and order. The sense of order was a common reference point also in other contexts, for instance inculcating in

children the habit of keeping their room clean and tidy was an important objective in the preschool work.

There seem to be some tension and inconsistencies in the normative construction of a child that emerges from official preschool documents, and from the teachers' and principal's accounts. On the one hand, there is the model of a child who is independent, creative and resourceful; on the other, instruments and approaches that would make the development of such qualities possible are criticized, and an emphasis is being placed on external discipline and order. The emphasis on developing a child's unique personality is accompanied by the perception of children as wild, unpredictable, unreliable and almost dangerous, who have to be controlled and contained – or, as the principal said, "hobbled." This incoherence can be one of the reasons for inconsistencies that could be observed in the teachers' approach to children and in their pedagogical practice.

## Preschool B

Preschool B, while not having developed an explicit model of a preschooler, such as the Graduate Profile, also followed certain perceptions and assumptions as to what children are and how they should be treated in a preschool institution. The preschool emphasized the ideal of a child as a subject in all educational practices and the need to take an individual and his or her uniqueness as a starting point for educational practice. Equally important was creating the opportunity for a child to develop, in particular to develop one's innate gifts and talents. While attentiveness to the needs of children with exceptional aptitudes and capabilities was claimed, the preschool scheme of work concentrated explicitly on ensuring equal opportunities and satisfying the educational needs of all children. The preschool emphasized the active role of a child in determining his or her learning process. Talking about teachers' professional competences, the preschool scheme of work pointed out that the role of a teacher consisted in "organizing, encouraging and supporting [the child] in his or her action and in striving to reach aims. It is the child, not the program, that indicates the direction of a teacher's work."

The teachers' perception of their pupils appeared to correspond with the normative conception of a child established in official documentation. They emphasized children's intelligence, creativity, imaginativeness, as well as independence and self-reliance. This was often attributed to the fact that the children they taught came from families of academics or professionals who

invested in their children, cared for them and stimulated them intellectually, and, as a result, the kids were self-confident or even stubborn.

Taking about children in comparison to adults, one of the teachers said:

> They invent a lot of cool things and are unconventional in their thinking. And this is the most interesting thing, that a child can sometimes come up with such an idea that you are surprised, but you say that well, it's indeed so. They are so open, they think outside of the box, they invent things. (Ms Agnieszka, Preschool B, interview, 2005)

Unlike Ms Małgorzata who discursively positioned children as requiring adults' incessant support in order to develop, Ms Agnieszka pointed to such characteristics of children that make them in some respects superior to adults. In her view, children possess certain features that adults have both lost and, if they are not attentive enough, can make children lose. In her words, "it is us, adults, who make them change so fast, who make them notice that this world is somewhat different from their ideas." This perception fits closely with what James, Jenks and Prout (1998: 13) identify as the "innocent child," having "a natural goodness and a clarity of vision." Significantly, Ms Agnieszka maintained that "there are no misbehaved children, only children having some kind of problems" (and she would often point to adults as their cause), and the adults' obligation was both to help children solve these problems and prevent them from losing their most valuable characteristics. The "innocent child" discourse entails considering children to be subjects, "not bundles of negative attributes, or incompletely formed persons waiting to become adults; they are who they are" (*ibid.*: 14). Such an approach is visible in Preschool B teachers' perception of children as "little people": not lacking anything, but human beings in their own right, and if there is anything that makes them distinct from adults, it is their imagination, creativity and lack of inhibition, or – in Ms Patrycja's view – the fact that they are less experienced than adults.

However, Preschool B teachers' perception of children seemed to be informed by yet another discourse – that of the "naturally developing child" (James, Jenks and Prout 1998: 17). Associated with Piaget's theory of development through stages, the naturally developing child discourse was founded on the assumptions of the naturalness of children and their gradual maturation. Ms Agnieszka's conviction, that it is adults who are responsible for the children's loss of valuable characteristics and for difficulties they experience, echoes the concern of development theories about adults' interference with children's development (Tyler 1993: 46). The belief that if

left undisturbed, children will naturally develop, emerges clearly in this statement:

> Paulina, who started here last year as a two-year-old, did not want to participate in anything last year. ... This year we also had various performances, and at Grandmother's Day she refused to play, she escaped to her grandma's lap, but now, at Mother's Day event she opened up, she wanted her part herself, she stood up and said her part. The child had simply overcome her inhibition. But the point it not to force, not to push, but simply to wait patiently. She has changed. And most importantly she grew older. (Ms Agnieszka, Preschool B, interview, 2005)

Children are not a *tabula rasa*, as Ms Agnieszka carefully indicated, but they have their own preferences, likes, inborn ways of acting and relating to others. The teacher's task is to recognize these predispositions and adjust her pedagogic practice accordingly, letting children – in Ms Patrycja's words – develop. The child's own development pace is a priority, and even though all the teachers talked about distinct age-related stages through which children move, the importance of waiting until children reach a level on which certain pedagogic practices become applicable, rather than pushing them to do what they are not yet ready for, remained unquestioned. A child's achievements are approached in a similar vein, as the preschool principal made clear:

> I believe it depends on every child's needs. For some it will be to lace their shoes, put on their jacket and zip it; and it's going to be a great achievement for them, and they can be sure not to go to school, to the playground or home with their shoes undone and with their jackets unzipped; for others it will be to learn to read fantastically and start counting and so on. But the one who's only learned to tie their shoes will by no means be made to feel worse than the one who's reading. ... So the point is for a child to find his or her own place and to feel well there." (Preschool B Principal, interview, 2007)

She also put a strong emphasis on giving children a choice, both in relation to activities and specific courses of action:

> This is the stage where you do not impose one solution [on children], and sometimes the solutions that children come up with surprise the teacher herself. (Preschool B Principal, interview, 2007)

As the preschool staff's comments reveal, there are no ready-made, universal goals and objectives that children have to reach at a specific moment. The adults' role is therefore to assist children in their development in a skillful manner: to observe how individual children develop and possibly to intervene,

to adjust their pedagogical practice to children's needs, and to provide children with variety of suggestions for activities and tasks so that they can experiment and discover what they are interested in. All these practices need to be carried out without exerting any pressure on children and ensuring that no damage is caused.

It could be claimed that the construction of a child in both preschools was somewhat ambiguous. On the ideological plane of the official documents both institutions pointed to similar beliefs and objectives: the need to assist children in their development, to help them fulfill their potential, to support them in getting to know themselves and the world around them, and developing an attitude of openness. An emphasis on preparing the children to play various roles in society was visible in both preschools, and so was the focus on helping children to make a smooth transition to school[19]. Children were provided with a lot of educational activities, from learning about their society or natural environment, to fundamental skills including mathematics, reading and writing[20]. The need to acquire certain academic and social skills was also frequently pointed out to the kids by their teachers. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999: 44) claim that the focus on having children "'ready to learn' and 'ready for school' by the age of compulsory schooling" is a significant dimension of the adult-driven process of children's development. This points to the first ambiguity in the preschool constructions of a child. Preschool B staff members and official documents underscored the importance of attending to children's development at their own pace, without hustling them and putting unnecessary pressure on them. They presented their task as providing children with a kind of symbolic scaffolding that would enable them to grow safely by building upon abilities the children already had. Nonetheless, as I will demonstrate in the remainder of this chapter and in the following chapters, the child-adult dichotomy and the belief in the need to

19 The similarities can be attributed to the adherence to the Core Curriculum in both preschools.

20 The latter was one of the elements clearly differentiating between the two preschools. Introducing the basics of reading and writing (most of the letters and some simple words) was obligatory in the final year, and this is what Preschool A offered. However, one Preschool B teacher claimed, based on her own research into this issue, that 4-year-olds are much more interested in learning to read and write than 6-year-olds, so in order not to waste this opportunity, she began to work on literacy skills with her pupils two years ahead of the prescribed age. As a result, by the time they left the preschool, most of the kids were able to read fluently fairly long texts. At that time their peers in the other institution had difficulties deciphering single short words.

teach children norms and rules of behavior, which entailed controlling them and regulating their lives, were a constant reference point in the teachers' relations with their pupils. The issue is even more complex as far as Preschool A is concerned. As I have already indicated, the discursive construction of a child produced there was far from coherent: references were made simultaneously to children's independence, creativity, resourcefulness or uniqueness as highly valued characteristics, and to the necessity to control, constrain or tame the children. The "old" teaching methods were accompanied by attempts to introduce modern approaches, e.g. drama methods or relaxation techniques, which, in turn, sometimes functioned as disciplinary instruments (e.g. when children were warned that they would have to relax for ten more minutes if they misbehave). It could be argued that Preschool A stood at a crossroads, and the teachers were torn between an adherence to old practices and the awareness of the existence of, and the need to implement, new understandings of the child, child-adult relations and pedagogical practice.

Despite the similarities in the normative construction of a child in the official documents produced in both preschools, the analysis so far seems to indicate that the understanding of a child and of a teacher's and preschool's role in relation to a child differed in each of the places. However, in the following part I go on to discuss elements of a discursive construction of a child that call such an assumption into question and render the declared model of a preschooler produced by Preschool B teachers even more ambiguous. The ideal of a well-behaved, self-reflecting and self-controlling child, present in both preschools, suggests that the two institutions may have more in common than could have otherwise appeared, and that inconsistencies and ruptures characterize both of them.

## A well-behaved child

The category of a "well-behaved", "polite", "good"[21] child, while not included in any of the official documents of either of the preschools, was the

21 The Polish word *grzeczny* used in this context is fairly difficult to render in English. "Well-behaved," "polite" and "good" are probably the closest equivalents, although there is also a distinct word to render "good," and Polish phrases "good child" and "well-behaved/polite" child have slightly different meanings. Moreover, this word can be used in a broader range of contexts that the English "well-

main point of reference in any discussion about the kids' behavior in both of them. The fact that it was so commonly evoked in various contexts seems to indicate that, on the level of everyday practice, it stayed at the core of the notion of a model preschool child. It could be explicitly presented by a teacher as an ideal the children should aspire to (as in the case of a teacher whose Christmas wish for herself was so that the children would behave well) or as a competence the children were expected to acquire before moving to school. Most frequently, however, it functioned as a disciplinary instrument: the claim that a child "misbehaved" served as a basis for punishing him or her, with such a reference being used simultaneously a means of constructing the child as "abnormal" (i.e., incapable of conforming to the norm). But the notion of "well-behaved" does not have any stable, intrinsic meaning; instead, it is defined by social actors drawing on their idea of what a child should be like as their resource. What in the context of the preschools in question does it mean exactly for a preschooler to behave well? Instances of congratulating a child for good behavior shed some light on it:

> Ms Zosia is praising children sitting at the table next to her. She says they are playing nicely. The kids quietly do jigsaw. (Preschool A, 31.10.2006)

> The teacher: "Look! Piękna is the one who sits most politely and most beautifully. Follow her example. (Piękna is sitting with her back upright, keeping her finger on her mouth.) See how nicely she is playing. I can talk with such a girl. Another person is a friend right here, Harry, very politely, look, [sitting] with a straight back." (Preschool A, 9.01.2007)

On the other hand, the children were criticized and punished for actions the teachers considered misbehavior, like in the following examples:

> During the rehearsal Will, Króliczek and Duch are reading a book. The teacher says to Will: "Are you going to read it during the performance too? What a bad child." (Preschool B, 27.03.2007)

> The teacher: "I don't want to hear a single word! If you say something, you'll go to bed! Kids are not allowed to say a single word during their meal. If anyone says anything, there'll be crying because misbehaved children will go to bed." (Preschool A, 22.04.2005)

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behaved": it can be evoked to describe the manner in which a child is sitting, eating, speaking and so on. Perhaps it is exactly because the word denotes so much that it becomes one of the predominant characteristics of a preschooler.

A number of characteristics of "well-behaved" children stem from these excerpts. Such children need to, first of all, obey their teachers and do what they are told to do; they also have to do a right thing at a right moment (thus being able to refrain from certain behavior at a time when they should concentrate on specific, often teacher-directed and initiated, activities). The emphasis on being quiet is especially striking: children need to play in silence, eat in silence, sit in silence. In fact, in one incident Ms Zosia instructed Preschool A children to "play very quietly as if you weren't in the room," which brings forth a rather disturbing image of a preschool with no kids. What emerges from these incidences, is an image of a constrained, disciplined, obedient child who closely watches his or her actions. The children were fully aware of the existence of such a model they should aspire to, as the following answers to my questions concerning well-behaved and misbehaved children illustrate:

> Robert: [If you are well-behaved] you do what the teacher tells you to do. (Preschool B, 10.10.2006)

> Robot Boy: [Well-behaved children] obey the teacher, eat politely, they don't jump on the gym ladder, don't hit other children, don't push, don't shout...
> KG: What does it mean that they eat politely?
> Robot Boy: Well, politely, calmly, without talking. And they don't pour anything on themselves, on the table. (Preschool B, 27.06.2007)

> Kacper: Well-behaved children don't interrupt at all and don't fight at all, but do what the teacher asks them to do. (Preschool B, 27.06.2007)

> Harry: A well-behaved child is one who listens to the teacher very closely.
> Dorota: A well-behaved child plays quietly and...
> Maks: And will say 'thank you' when they get a candy.
> Dorota: And doesn't beat kids. And plays with others, shares toys, and cleans up nicely and draws.
> KG: And misbehaved children?
> Dorota: Misbehaved children beat up kids, don't eat, beat up kids.
> Maks: Show their teeth, show their tongue, beat up kids, pinch kids, scratch kids, lie.
> Dorota: And spread soap on them, and pee on the floor. (Preschool A, 31.05.2006)

The need to listen to and obey teachers recurs, which points to obedience as one of the major features of the ideal of a proper preschooler. It also indicates the existence of hierarchical power structures in the institutions, where adult professionals have the right to give orders to children who, in

turn, are expected to follow them without arguing. The kids were frequently reminded that they were "not to discuss" with a teacher about matters such as where to sit, stand or when to eat or go to wash their hands. In one rather telling incident in Preschool B, when a child did not want to give away her crayon, Ms Patrycja told her: "OK, so please go to the other room. You feel like having a crayon, and I feel like you going to the other room" and then added to the whole group: "There are people who think that they can do whatever they feel like doing."

Obedience was an explicitly taught virtue. During a religion class in Preschool A I witnessed the following conversation:

> The religion teacher: Who are we to obey?
> Kids: God.
> Then they add: parents, a grandmother.
> The religion teacher: And shouldn't we obey the teacher?
> Kids: We should too. (Preschool A, 20.02.2007)

The last quote opens up a possibility of interpreting the insistence on obedience as related to Christian heritage which is still very alive in Polish culture. In his *Security, Territory, Population* Foucault (2007) discusses the concept of pastorate. Of a particular importance to Christianity, this concept was defined by the principle of "pure obedience." This pure obedience assumes a complete subordination of the sheep, i.e., someone to be guided, to a shepherd or a pastor who is to direct it. As Foucault says, this is a relationship in which one individual submits to another, not on the basis of any kind of a law, justified regulations or reason, but precisely because of an individual character of the relationship. In a preschool context, this could be exemplified by the teacher's justification of her order by saying "because I tell you to do this." Obedient children should act in the same way as Foucault's exemplary novice in a monastery: "The novice's perfection and merit ultimately consists in considering it a fault to do anything without having received an explicit order to do it" (Foucault 2007: 228-229). Similarly, preschool children had to wait for an order and could be scolded for doing anything out of their own will:

> Girls have finished eating. They rhythmically ask in unison: "Can-we-move-from-the-ta-ble? The teacher tells them to stay." (Preschool B, 26.01.2006)

> Malec gets up. The teacher: "Please, sit down, everyone. Malec, why are you standing? Has anyone allowed you to stand up?" (Preschool B, 27.03.2007)

> One of the kids wants to add something to a conversation. The teacher: "Did I allow you to speak? Wait." (Preschool A, 10.05.2006)

Besides being obedient, well-behaved children had to develop the ability to act in a civilized manner and collaborate with others, which appears to be a reflection of the officially stated objective of teaching children to abide by social norms and to be valuable members of various social groups. This was frequently pointed to in Preschool B, where the teachers often discussed the meaning of behaving well with the kids, drawing the children's attention to features such as being nice to each other, sharing toys and sweets, or playing peacefully and refraining from fighting. Furthermore, Ms Agnieszka from Preschool B strongly emphasized the importance for children to become aware of the consequences their behavior had for their peers and the group as such. She characterized a child who appeared to be well-behaved, but in her view was not, in the following way:

> She is a well-behaved child, isn't she? But this well-behaved child sometimes misbehaves. And it is not that she makes trouble, disturbs children, fights – she simply doesn't abide by the group regulations, which makes other children feel rejected and causes resentment and conflicts. And nothing really happens to anyone, nobody calls anyone names, but because she rejects children, selects children, picks out children, the situation in the group gets awkward because children are resentful, some cry... No physical harm is being inflicted there, no apparent harm, but there is inner resentment. Children feel it deeply. Because this is harm. So generally speaking she is a well-behaved child, but her behavior makes other children upset. (Ms Agnieszka, Preschool B, interview, 2005)

A well-behaved child is constructed here as a responsible member of a group who is empathetic and takes others' feelings and emotions into consideration. The underlying assumption that children should not reject anyone was constantly present in both preschools. Even though the teachers recognized that kids had their friends who they preferred to spend time with, there was still an expectation that all children play with others and that nobody should be excluded from their activities. The attentiveness to proper group functioning was also visible in condemning the practice of solving arguments in a violent manner (although the exception made for Harcon needs to be remembered):

> Ola and Malec have an argument which the latter reports to the teacher.
> Malec: Ola is beating me.
> Ola: Because he kicked me.

> Ms Agnieszka: So you need to tell Malec not to kick you. And what will Malec say then?
> Malec: I'm sorry.
> Ms Agnieszka: And now Ola is to say that as well.
> Ola: I'm sorry. (Preschool B, 12.06.2006)

Proper behavior could also be taught explicitly. In Preschool B, where – according to the teachers – there was a need for it given the kids' egoistic and selfish attitude, this was a frequent topic of casual conversations. In the third year it was once a special theme discussed during a whole week. As a part of it, the children prepared a playlet for their parents. They acted out a lesson during which they learned about good manners in the preschool: the need to say "good morning," "good bye," "I'm sorry" and "thank you." Saying "good morning" and "good bye" was a matter of regular training also in Preschool A. As Ms Zosia reflected, "When they are leaving, they would say 'good bye,' but when they come I have to greet them. So I tell them to leave the room and enter it again [saying "good morning"] so that they all realize that we say 'good morning' to all kids." In a similar vein, the children were trained in proper eating, i.e., using fork and knife and without creating a mess ("I believe that one should leave preschool with some culture of eating," as Ms Zosia emphasized). In Preschool B, in turn, a child could be scolded for not closing the door upon entering a room and returned to do that. "Good manners" that a proper member of a society should develop and exhibit in interactions with others were the focus of both institutions.

Another feature of a well-behaved preschooler was contributing to keeping the classroom clean and tidy. From the very beginning children were instructed to maintain order, which meant cleaning up toys and materials they played with, putting chairs in the right place, and occasionally helping out with general cleaning. The assumption that the classroom had to be tidy was an indisputable issue; the point was how to develop a child's habit of cleaning up most efficiently. The following excerpt from Preschool A principal's speech to the parents is quite revealing:

> And please, take a look, maybe you don't come in here so often, but please see that everything is so tidy here. And it is not just that the teacher cleans up, but the kids are simply taught... I sometimes come here and I really admire it. I admire the teachers for what they have managed to achieve. There is order here. (Preschool A, 6.03.2007)

The cleanliness obligation had an additional function of preventing kids from playing the way they wanted to if their activities entailed creating some

disorder. In one incident, an aide in Preschool B complained about boys taking books from a shelf: she had just "tidied up the books, and the boys again made such a mess there." In another situation Preschool A children were forbidden to play on the carpet because it had already been vacuumed. Moreover, a Preschool A teacher explained the tendency of the staff to specify where the kids could play by saying that if children could decide on this on their own, "toys would get damaged faster ... because he will take this, take that, throw it all around and then there is no-one to clean it up"[22]. The emphasis on keeping order, even at the cost of giving the children the possibility to act on their own wishes, reinforces the construction of a constrained preschooler who should adjust his or her activities to the requirements of the preschool. This suggests that well-behaved preschoolers have to be able to sacrifice to some extent their needs and interests for the sake of a smooth perpetuation of the institution.

However, the focus on maintaining order in the room could serve another function: in Preschool A it was used to construct the subject position of the child as a preschool citizen or host, expected to take responsibility for it and considered capable of it. Ms Małgorzata put it this way:

> Oftentimes moms would say: There is such an order here in this room, it is so very tidy here. And I would say: Well, there are hosts here. (Ms Małgorzata, Preschool A, interview, 2007)

Ms Zosia also reminded the children who were getting ready for a performance that they had to represent the preschool properly:

> Ms Zosia tells the kids that all the parents will come in the afternoon, that the kids will make presents for them, and the parents will come to see "what beautiful actors you are, the citizens of this preschool, mature hosts, responsible, and how nicely you will present yourselves." (Preschool A, 22.11.2006)

In this way children are constructed as full-fledged members of the preschool, entirely identified with it. This opens up the space for a rather complex

22 In her study of symbolic violence in preschools, Falkiewicz-Szult (2007: 126) observes a similar tendency among teachers who justify restricting children's access to toys by saying that some of them are expensive and children damage them quickly while toys that are in good condition serve as room decorations; other toys make too much noise and playing simultaneously with several items later leads to spending too much time cleaning up the room at the expense of educational activities.

subject position. On the one hand, children are constructed here as responsible, reliable and trustworthy. They are supposed to represent the preschool in an appropriate manner and the teachers are confident that they will play their role properly and will not be a source of embarrassment[23]. On the other hand, however, a question needs to be posed as to the extent to which children are capable of choosing (or not) such a position. Do they identify with the preschool and feel responsible for it in the way the teachers depict it? Are they indeed the citizens of the preschool and its hosts, or are they pushed into such a position? The fact that the children rarely cleaned on their own initiative and usually had to be forced to do it by the teachers (and then went to great lengths to avoid it) calls the presumed identification with the preschool into question. The children's attitudes toward participation in performances, competitions and other events where they had to represent the preschool were also far from straightforward, as for some of them it was a stressful and unpleasant experience. Finally, this subject position needs to be analyzed in the context of the totality of the children's preschool lives. Their citizen status appears rather problematic in the light of their very limited power to decide on most of the aspects of their preschool functioning. As I will demonstrate in Chapter 7, Preschool A children's impact on the organization of preschool reality was minimal. It could be argued therefore that the references to children as citizens or hosts either played a merely symbolic function, or served as a disciplinary instrument. Creating children's sense of identification with the preschool and their responsibility for it could be interpreted as intended to make them perform better. Significantly, I did not observe any references to children as citizens or hosts in Preschool B, where the children's decision-making power was relatively bigger than in Preschool A.

The category of a well-behaved child therefore opened up the possibility for children to take up different subject positions. Children as citizens/hosts was one of them. Another emerged from the emphasis on obedience, subordination and control, with children constructed as inferior or as members of a minority group subjugated to more powerful adults (Mayall 2002). Such a subject position appears rather problematic in the context of the objectives of preschool education declared in the official documents of the institutions. Can children become independent if they are discouraged

23 The sheep-shepherd concept is visible here again: teachers as pastors identify with their pupils' success or failure; the children's performance is a measurement of the teachers' pedagogical achievements.

from acting on their own interests and preferences because this would mean creating disorder? Or can they become creative and resourceful if they are allowed to do only what they are told to do? A "well-behaved," obedient and subordinated child, however, appear to be the perfect instrument of reproducing an existing social system: someone who will accept and follow regulations without calling them into question or even reflecting on them; who will not venture to rearrange present order, who will, in a sense, play various social roles as expected – also at the expense of one's own needs and preferences. As a Preschool A girl said when asked what happens when a teacher tells her to do something she does not feel like doing: "I do what the teacher tells me to do. And I don't listen to myself, but I only listen to the teacher." A more general question arises from this: is it possible to prepare children to function in a democratic society in an institution that in its everyday practice constructs the ideal of a well-behaved, subordinated and obedient child? Moss (2007: 14) claims that early childhood institutions can be arenas of a renewal of democracy – but for this to happen, they need to be democratic. This, in turn, entails a specific conception of the child: in Moss's words, "a competent citizen, an expert in his or her own life, having opinions that are worth listening to and having the right and competence to participate in collective decision making" (15). Such a construction remains very much at odds with the model centered around the notions of obedience and subordination. Occasional labeling of children as citizens does not solve the problem.

The focus on the need to become a good group member created yet another subject position. Through it, children were constructed as (at least potentially) responsible for others' well-being and empathic; as moral subjects capable of controlling their own behavior in order to avoid hurting others. This required taking their abilities and competences seriously rather than downplaying them. From the Foucaultian perspective this can be interpreted as governing oneself through the use of technologies of the self, i.e., means "which permit individuals to effect ... a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault 2003: 146). Well-behaved children had to govern their actions in such a way as to become good members of their group, capable of developing proper relations with others. The notion of controlling one's behavior and working on oneself was an

important reference point in the construction of a normative ideal of a preschooler, which I will discuss in more detail in the following section.

## Self-reflecting and self-controlling child

> KG: What happens when kids misbehave in a preschool?
> Harry: The teacher tells them to go stand in a corner so that they think over what they should do and what not to do. (Preschool A, 31.05.2006)

Two assumptions have lied at the basis of the so-called new understanding of children. One was the idea that children are capable of reflecting on themselves – their feelings, interests and needs – and that they can act upon the outcome of such introspection. Second was the conviction that pedagogical practice has to be grounded in the recognition of children as agents having the right to express their opinions, and for those opinions to be taken into consideration (cf. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence 1999: 48-50). While at first sight appearing to open up the possibility for children to have an impact on their everyday lives in an education institution, rather than only being subject to adults' decisions, the emphasis on self-reflection and self-regulation becomes yet another disciplinary technology: it is something that an individual is expected to employ. As Fendler (2001: 124) writes, "in order to be recognized – or recognize oneself – as educated, the subject understands and reflexively disciplines desires, feelings, love, wishes and fears." Looking inside oneself thus becomes an obligation. In the early childhood education context, taking responsibility for one's own learning and social development comes to be seen as a competence children are demanded to develop. For instance, Danish kindergarten children are supposed to govern themselves by finding out what they want to do and how they feel, and by choosing their activities based on their own preferences that they discovered and communicated (Kampmann 2004, Warming and Kampmann 2007). Self-inspection was also expected from Polish preschoolers, which may appear surprising in the context of the strong emphasis put on obeying unconditionally teachers and acting according to their instructions. However, while in the case of Danish children self-reflection seems to concern virtually all aspects of their everyday life in a daycare institution, Polish kids were requested to apply it to a much more limited range of issues. The object of their reflection was supposed to be their own behavior in relation to existing norms and regulations – and specifically the instances of their breaking of such rules. For this reason, the

demand to engage in an act of introspection often seemed to function, as the above quotes indicate, as yet another instrument of punishment and self-investigation was to take place mainly when a child misbehaved.

Searching for the origins of the self-reflection practice, Foucault (1988a: 60-61; 2003) points to an ancient Greek tradition of self-examination whose aim was to review and memorize correct objectives and rules of conduct for the sake of the perfection of one's behavior in the process of achieving those goals. Self-reflection that Polish preschoolers were expected to carry out resembles this practice and as such it complements the demand to be obedient. The following incident demonstrates it clearly:

> Mateusz and Alina are running around the classroom. The teacher tells them to come to her and asks them what they are not to do. They say: "We are not to run." The teacher: "So if you know that, sit down for 5 minutes, one of you here, and the other one over there, to think it over." (Preschool B, 5.02.2007)

The purpose of "thinking it over" is to make sure that one remembers regulations concerning good behavior in a preschool as well as to evaluate one's own actions in light of them. Rarely did this introspection encompass reflecting on one's feelings and needs, and even less often doing so with the intention of planning one's activities. Children relatively rarely had the opportunity to talk about their emotions or interests, and when it did happen, not all feelings could always be expressed. For instance, a teacher did not react at all to a child who, while talking about his experience of a relaxation activity, said that he felt bad. The teacher ignored a statement that clearly was at odds with the intended objective of the activity, which was to discover that it was nicer to calm down and relax than to shout.

Thus, the ultimate purpose of self-reflection was to become a "better" preschooler, i.e., one who is aware of the existing regulations and makes a conscious effort to follow them, rather than to discover any kind of inner "truth" of oneself. This was made clear by an explicit demand that children work on themselves and improve their own conduct. Following the path toward perfection entailed not only analyzing one's own behavior in order to judge its appropriateness, but could also include inventing forms of punishment for oneself, thus forcing a child to weigh the seriousness of his or her misdeed:

> Ms Zosia: "Scooby Doo, I told you, don't start fighting today. Is your behavior appropriate? What should I to do with you? Please, all come up

> yourselves with a punishment for yourselves. Please start working on your upbringing. Scooby Doo, and really please change." (Preschool A, 22.11.2007)

The task of working on oneself could be perceived as a way of strengthening the ties between teachers and children, in a manner similar to that of a Christian pastor and a member of the flock in Foucault's (2007: 233) account. Children had to look inside their conscience to recognize what they did wrong and commit themselves to an effort aimed at improvement – but this commitment was made in front of the teacher as a guard:

> Ms Zosia: "Do you know what you are being punished for? How many times did I instruct you and you still couldn't behave and play? How many times? Did you count? I gave you five warnings and you just went on. So, are you going to work on yourself? (Sebastian nods his head.) In what way? (He says something inaudible.) Who do you promise this to? To the ladybird (there is an image of a ladybird on the wall) or to the teacher?"
> Sebastian: "The teacher." (Preschool A, 31.10.2006)

In this way, entrusting children with the task of introspection did not necessarily entail rendering them more responsible for their development. This means a somewhat different subjectivity construction than in the case of "flexible souls" of students/kindergarten children who need to take control over all aspects of their learning and development. On the one hand, there are children expected to be self-governing, responsible for their actions, including their own learning, considered (or urged to be) capable of discovering and expressing their own feelings, interests and preferences (Kampmann 2004: 140) – though, as Fendler (2001: 127, 133-134) emphasizes, not necessarily freer, but rather to an ever increasing extent disciplining themselves in line with what is socially posited as desirable goals to attain. On the other hand, there are children for whom introspection means finding out the extent to which they have mastered the competence of subordinating their interests and preferences to rules, regulations and objectives set out by others; children "subjected in a continuous network of obedience" (Foucault 2007: 234).

In Preschool B the practice of reflecting and working on oneself took a slightly different form. First, its main object was the child's performance as a group member. Second, it became a formalized practice. When the kids were in their second year, their teacher introduced a "good behavior week," an element of which were sessions where children had to evaluate themselves and assign themselves a specific color, depending on their performance. This is how the teacher summarized this practice:

> The children assigned themselves colors on the basis of their behavior... And so the children tried to become aware of this themselves. It was not the group to assess them, it was each and every child assessing him- or herself ... what good did I do today, what did I do that was bad; did I hurt anyone, was I able to play in peace, not to quarrel... So that the kids start to realize that certain types of behavior result in the specific reactions of others. ... by the end of the week it was going really well; the kids could reflect on themselves, on how they behaved. (Ms Agnieszka, Preschool B, interview, 2005)

What happens here is a public act of confession in the course of which children had to recall and detail all their "sins" (deeds that conflicted with norms and rules regulating the group daily life and having to do with interpersonal relations) as well as their achievements (i.e., the ability to follow the regulations). While not spelled out here, this practice required that children pay constant attention to all aspects of their behavior and its impact on others, in order to be able to bring back to one's mind all one's acts when necessary. This means that the children were expected to constantly remember all regulations and to able to judge whether what they were doing remained in line with what they should be doing – thus it is not accidental that "Think!" was one of instructions the children were given most frequently.

The following year the teacher introduced another (self-)assessment instrument: a behavior chart. It was a large sheet of paper with everyone's name on it, on which all the teachers could put their comments concerning the conduct (or, in practice, misconduct) of specific children. Once a day the whole group gathered in front of the chart and the teacher read out, one by one, all the names. The children – on their own, or with the help of other kids or the teacher – assessed their behavior, and the teacher would draw either a sun or a black dot next to their name, depending on whether they were judged to had behaved well or badly respectively. The teacher used this as an opportunity to review all the regulations and to invite children to work harder to improve their conduct.

What is particularly striking about these two instruments is the emphasis put on the consequences of the practice of self-reflection for the group functioning. An important (if not the principal) objective of the assessment sessions was for the kids to realize what kind of impact their actions had on others with the purpose of improving relations within the group. The practice of self-evaluation was therefore a means for the children to become competent members of their group who would not harm others and would act for the benefit of all (cf. Danaher, Schirato and Webb 2000: 130). Indeed, the teacher made such a purpose explicit. While children were complaining a

lot about some of their peers during one assessment session, she said: "You seem to be very happy when someone gets a black dot. And the point is that all children behave well and we all feel good." Thus, the intention behind the requirement that children work on themselves was not only that they improve themselves, but also that their community becomes better.

Self-assessment sessions can also be perceived as a disciplinary instrument that forces children to develop a particular competence: to control all aspects of their own behavior, not only in the sense of monitoring them, but also of being able to refrain from certain actions. It could be argued that to some extent this was precisely what the children were actually evaluated on: as one Preschool B teacher said to a boy, "I haven't drawn a black dot for you yet, but it depends on you as to whether it will be there or not." The emphasis on developing the capacity to prevent oneself from getting involved in undesirable activities was typical of both the institutions studied. The children were expected to control what they were doing and were rewarded or punished for their performance: either symbolically, with a yellow sun or the lack of a black dot on the behavior chart, or in a more literal sense, like in this example from Preschool A:

> Ms Zosia tells Harcon to behave well. He will get a personal reward from her, but his good behavior must continue until Friday, and so do Subaru and Scooby Doo. Then she tells Subaru to clean nicely and to watch his step. She repeats "watch your step" several times to all the three boys. (Preschool A, 26.06.2007)

Monitoring one's behavior and stopping oneself from doing what was deemed inappropriate was part of a more general practice of self-control that covered multiple dimensions of children's everyday lives in a preschool. First, the kids were required to control their emotions: they could not express their excitement too enthusiastically and had to make sure they did not get so involved in their play that they failed to remember to keep their voices down (or the teacher could reprimand them, for instance saying that she knows "it's difficult to play quietly, but it's a bit much [what you are doing]"). Situations where the children were criticized for giving full expression to their emotions were numerous and could include anything from dancing dynamically to lively music, to running in my direction to give me a hug when I entered the room, to saying that they did not want to eat their meal. "Calm down" or "stop making yourself wound up" were common responses to such behavior, which might suggest that the ability to stay composed, controlled and, in a sense, mature, was an important feature of the model preschooler.

The subject positions that opened up for children in relation to self-reflection and self-governing differed somewhat in each of the preschools. The emphasis on the need to govern one's conduct in order to be a good group member, much more evident in Preschool B than in Preschool A, enables the construction of children as moral agents and integral parts of a collective, responsible for ensuring that nobody gets hurt (both physically and emotionally), and that everyone feels well and welcomed in the group. The construction of a proper child that was more clearly articulated in Preschool A, but not entirely missing from Preschool B either, was more ambiguous. The child was positioned as someone who is capable of self-governing, but this self-governing focuses on the child's efforts to master and follow external regulations, and to restrict oneself as much as possible. In this case, a model, well-behaved child produced though practices of self-reflection and self-control is one who is expected to work on themselves, but the ultimate objective of that work is to achieve perfection in obedience and rule-compliance. From the perspective of the preschool institution, this form of self-governing could be viewed as positive and desirable as its objective was to create a "better" (i.e., more pleasant and friendly) common space where both children and teachers would feel well. Nonetheless, perceived in terms of power relations, it further added to the construction of a child as someone who is expected, or even required, to accept and follow existing regulations, rather than to reflect on them and, perhaps, challenge them.

## Gendered preschoolers

Although it was never expressed explicitly, the preschools were gender-differentiated sites, where children were constructed as girls and boys. In the course of daily practice children were taught what women (girls) and men (boys) should do, how to look or interact with others. This is not anything unexpected. The role that educational institutions play in "gendering" children has already been well documented in research (cf., for example, Delamont 1983, Thorne 1993, Eder 1995, Connolly 1995, Martin 1998, Łaciak 1998). The preschools I visited were also places tailored to clear-cut girls and boys and had their own ways of announcing the existence of this division: from separate toilets for girls and boys to different (and rather gender-stereotypical) gifts for each of the gender groups on a gift day before Christmas. These structural solutions were accompanied by children's self-grouping into same-

gender clusters. The kids tended to spend time with their peers of the same gender and the activities of girls and boys differed, with the former often playing with Barbie dolls, drawing princesses or reading their W.I.T.C.H. comic books as they grew older, and the latter playing with cars, planes and other machinery or building garages or castles[24]. Moreover, the teachers employed a wide range of means that worked to effectively differentiate between girls and boys. Among the most common ones were the division of children into gender groups[25], casual comments concerning girls' or boys' proper behavior or activities typical of them (e.g. "Boys rule in the kitchen! What a terrible thing!" or "You [Piotrek] will go to school, you'll need to have some strength to play football with other boys" heard in Preschool B) or criticizing children for behavior that did not accord with gender norms ("Girls, the kitchen corner is not cleaned up. Aren't you ashamed? Aren't you ashamed that you have naked dolls?" as happened in Preschool A). The teachers could also engage in much more complex practices of naturalizing gender differences, such as teaching about gendered occupations in Preschool B:

> Ms Patrycja: "A forester. Can women be foresters?" The kids: "No." The teacher: "Not really. It is a typically male occupation. They keep order in a forest... they look after animals so that they don't fall into a trap, aren't hungry, listen, they chase poachers. And a woman would feel threatened." Then there is a picture of a fisherman. The teacher: "This is a male occupation." The children shout: "Male, male!". The teacher: "Typically male, because it is also really hard work, you have to sail in the sea. And listen, if moms sailed in the

24 Some of the girls' activities, such as playing with Barbie dolls or reading comic books, were much more typical of Preschool B than Preschool A, which may point to differences in the socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds of the children. Preschool A children activities were still gender-differentiated, and it could be argued that those of the girls were less exciting than those of the boys in the same preschool, and of girls in Preschool B.

25 Practices of gender differentiation were particularly visible in Preschool B, where children could be, for instance, asked to carry out activities in gender groups. In many cases there seemed to be no rational justification for the division, e.g. when children of one gender were handed some objects or were asked to move to a certain place before those of the other. Asked about the rationale behind the teachers' gender differentiation practices, Ms Agnieszka claimed that it was simply the easiest way to divide children and it served the purpose of maintaining order and ensuring a smooth transition from one task to another. However, it could be argued that such practices were not as innocent as they appeared. By constituting children as separate groups of girls and boys and emphasizing the difference, the teachers created space in which "gender-benders," i.e., children who in various ways challenged gender division were stigmatized.

> sea, for instance on those long-distance ships, who would take care of children?" One of the boys says: "A dad," another: "A father." The teacher: "Well, not all fathers are so good at taking care of their children. They wouldn't have time. They couldn't. And women wouldn't have time if they sailed." Kacper: "They could give birth on a ship." The teacher: "Oh, they wouldn't then have good conditions for raising their babies." (Preschool B, 29.05.2007)

Not only did the teacher present the children with a stereotypical gendered division of labor (both in terms of specific occupations and a customary division of labor into productive and reproductive), but also provided them with normative constructions of masculinity and femininity, clearly relating the latter to childcare that she disconnected from the former. Interestingly, the children appeared rather open and flexible in their understanding of gender roles, yet the teacher insisted on strictly drawing the boundaries between men's and women's behavior.

Through such practices the image of a preschool as a gender-differentiated site where children were positioned as girls and boys was developed. Some of the children opposed such a positioning, nonetheless the clear-cut distinction remained the norm. Moreover, the value ascribed to the positions of a girl and a boy appeared rather equivocal. While all teachers claimed that they treated boys and girls as equal, in both preschools femininity functioned discursively as a negative reference point with features typical of women and girls being considered less worthy. Additionally, some practices adopted in Preschool A effectively worked to marginalize the girls.

## Preschool A: Disappearing girls

In Preschool A, the practices of gender differentiation took a rather peculiar shape. In some ways, gender appeared to be pushed to the background there. Children rarely seemed to be positioned as gendered beings and instances of commenting on their behavior as proper or improper for a girl or a boy were also infrequent. Instead, as I demonstrated earlier in this chapter, the references to a good preschool child were very common. It could be argued that the emphasis on children's proper behavior, understood as obedience, rule-following and calmness, was so strong that it overpowered any constructions of a good girl and a good boy. All children, irrespective of their gender, were expected to be polite, well-behaved and composed. Yet, some of my material suggests that the preschool practices, rather than being gender-

neutral, in fact worked to disempower girls and make them symbolically disappear from the group.

Given the fact that the boys constituted a vast majority of pupils (there were only five to eight girls in the group of 25 children) and (in the teachers' view) tended to cause more trouble than the girls, they were also much more visible and attracted more attention from the teachers. The teachers interacted much more with the boys than with the girls: they disciplined them more, but also talked with them in a rather casual manner more frequently than with the girls[26]. Significantly, I observed several incidents where the teachers could not remember a girl's name. Instead, they often used diminutives and other belittling or even derogatory expressions to address them, such as "the little one" or "dolly." Alternatively, the girls could be collectively called "the five-year-olds," thus not being treated as individual children.

Thus, the girls' position both in the teachers' discourse and in the daily practice was rather ambiguous. First, "mythical" girls, functioning as a theoretical point of reference, were presented as highly valuable. For instance, Ms Zosia wished there had been more girls in the group because "they calm down the group, the boys. The boys try to assist them, to play with them." She drew directly on the gender difference discourse, in which girls and boys are constituted as entirely distinct from each other while each of the gender categories is homogeneous. In this discourse, boys are wild, unruly and disobedient, while girls are calm, polite and capable of restoring order. Heterosexual romantic relationships are a significant point of reference here: the girls' ability to positively influence the boys' behavior results from the desire of the latter to attract the girls' attention and win their sympathy. Moreover, a very strong discourse about girls' (and women's) privileged position circulated in the preschool. The teachers could be heard saying that women and girls should go first, and such a message was readily taken up by the children, who would, for instance, remind each other that boys should not take toys away from girls.

The teachers' perception and positioning of actual girls in the group was, however, more complex. On the one hand, still within the nice girls-taming-boys discourse, they functioned as rescuers, restoring peace and order in the

26 Another factor could, however, contribute to this tendency. In the final year, when the group became age-mixed, the majority of the girls were 5 years old, and – as I will demonstrate in Chapter 10 – for a number of reasons the teachers paid more attention to the 6-year-olds. Age and gender intersected to produce a complex network of child-adult relationships.

group. The gymnastics teacher rearranged the order in which children were seated in such a way that boys were supposed to sit between girls. She explained that the girls would civilize the boys, while the aide commented that the girls were so nice and always willing to help. At the same time, however, the girls could be depicted in a much less favorable manner. First, they – as girls, i.e., members of a specific category, as opposed to individual children – were criticized for not performing well enough: not singing as well as the teacher would like them to, for being sluggish, lacking spirit, behaving like "a sleeping beauty." This kind of criticism is interesting as it stands in stark contrast to the usual accusation of hyperactivity leveled at children and may suggest that there was a rupture in the construction of the proper preschooler. Apparently, the ideal of self-constraint, control and composure was not unquestionable and universal, and if children actually managed to fulfill it, they were reproved for it. Second, in the teachers' view, although there were only a few girls, they were "worse than the boys, they provoked." The construction of girls as provokers who drive boys to misbehave was clearly visible in the preschool. While the girls did get involved in conflict situations with the boys, my observations suggest that there was little foundation for considering them provokers. Instead, it could be argued that such an interpretation of their actions resulted from the preconceived idea of the girls as giving way to the boys. Incidences in which the girls were expected by the teachers to act in such a manner were manifold, as the following excerpts illustrate:

> Beata tells the teacher that Scooby Doo took away one of the rings with which she was playing. Ms Zosia responded: "Scooby Doo took the ring and now, look, he's blowing at it, and this is very good, he's exercising." Beata opposes and the teacher says: "Don't you have other rings, Beata? One ring fewer, and that's it." (Preschool A, 28.02.2007)

> The children have been working with construction blocks and now they are to clean up. Some boys built a swimming pool and the teacher lets them keep it as a display, instead of taking it apart. Two girls built an animal house. They want to put it on display too, but the teacher tells them to dismantle it, saying that one item on display will be enough. (Preschool A, 22.11.06)

In the above situations the girls' needs and interests are constructed as less relevant and worth supporting than those of the boys. In this context, and taking into consideration the fact that girls were also perceived as those who were capable of creating a positive atmosphere in the group, it can easily be imagined that acts of the girls' resistance toward boys could be read as

provoking them. In the same vein, the teachers were highly attentive to the girls' misbehavior. Symptomatically, I observed several incidents where, despite boys' and girls' involvement in a conflict situation, only the girls were punished for it.

Moreover, girls could be marginalized and devalued as a result of the selection of activities and tasks for the children. For instance, one of the themes of monthly library visits was planes and cars, presented by the librarian as the boys' favorite topic. Indeed, the whole session – a practice of gender differentiation as such – proved to be tailored to the boys. They were the ones who were asked questions ("And now a question for the boys: What car makes do you know?"); they were given books and encyclopedias on cars and planes; finally, they were asked to color pictures depicting planes (while the girls were coloring pictures of a balloon). Through the construction of the library session as of special interest to the boys, the girls were positioned as outsiders and indifferent to the topic. As a result, they also escaped the staff's attention and were marginalized throughout the meeting.

The girls could also be given less interesting tasks. In one of the most striking incidents, the children were asked to make drawings to illustrate poems. The boys had to draw a plane which would later be used as a background for a collage and displayed. When it came to the girls, the teacher said: "The girls have a problem, because they have to draw illustrations to a poem 'A needle and a thread were dancing'." She gave them a book with this poem and related drawings in it, and requested that they choose pictures they would like to copy. There was no mention of displaying the girls' works and the teacher, while frequently commenting on the boys' drawing, paid virtually no attention to the girls throughout the activity. My impression was that it was the boys whose task mattered, and apparently the girls must have interpreted it in a similar way as they did not put much effort into drawing their pictures.

All the practices discussed effectively worked to position girls as marginalized, devalued and less important in the preschool structure. One could possibly argue that such a construction constituted the foundation for the boys' violence against the girls, which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 8.

## Undervalued femininity as a constraint

Gender played a somewhat different role in Preschool B. On the one hand, the number of girls and boys was similar, and the girls were much more visible

there than those in Preschool A. At the same time, gender differentiation practices were quite prevalent in Preschool B. While they usually did not entail the unequal positioning of girls and boys, some of them did have such an effect. One of them was playing on the computer.

The computer was a highly desirable item. Sometimes teachers used it for educational activities, but usually children played games on it during their free play time. Being one of the most attractive activities, playing on the computer consistently led to serious conflicts among children, and in particular between boys and girls. While most of the girls claimed they were not interested in it, there were a few who enjoyed it a lot. However, boys monopolized the computer desk. Teachers rarely intervened, and if they did, they were usually concerned about the noise level or the sitting arrangement, ensuring that no one was standing on a chair. Unless explicitly brought up by the girls, gender dynamics went unnoticed by the teachers. In some instances the teachers' involvement further marginalized the girls, as had happened when Ms Patrycja allowed the boys to play first while telling the girls to wait.

It has been observed that the freedom of choice given to children does not necessarily lead to the reconstitution of gender relations. Clark (1989: 251) maintains that discourses available to children may work to close off the possibility of broadening the scope of their action even if formal limitations have been removed. Not intervening in activities that were commonly understood as more appropriate and attractive for boys than for girls, the teachers failed to provide children with an opportunity to reconstruct their understanding of what girls and boys can do[27].

Besides practices that disadvantaged the girls, the notion of femininity (and features, skills or activities typically associated with women) as inferior to masculinity (and all that is associated with it) was not entirely absent from the discourse on gender that circulated in Preschool B. This was particularly visible in the context of action of some of the girls considered "gender-

27 The constraining power of discourses became strikingly visible one day when, while the boys were playing on the computer, a group of girls were busy helping their teacher with cutting out and painting some Christmas decorations. The girls volunteered to do that and enjoyed this activity, yet the question arises as to whether they would refrain from playing on the computer had it not been accepted that it was more "legitimate" for the boys to do that and, consequently, had it not involved a great deal of fighting for access. Would they be so willing to get engaged in painting angels, had it not been a part of commonsense – including their own – knowledge that girls enjoy this type of quiet, manual work and are good at it?

benders." One of them was Króliczek (A Little Rabbit): very active, independent, resourceful, self-assured, resistant and not willing to let anyone rule over her. She "hated dolls" and not only did she play with items considered typical of boys, but also spent most of her time with boys, building fortresses, guns and garages, or pretending to be a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle. Her acts of venturing into the boys' sphere could be perceived as stretching the boundaries of what is held to be appropriate and characteristic of girls. Yet, she openly claimed that she would rather be a boy than a girl. Moreover, she could be heard referring to femininity as a kind of a stigma, a feature that serves to belittle a person. The following conversation about conflicts related to playing on the computer is particularly instructive in this respect:

> KG: Why don't the boys let you play?
> Cornelia: Because they don't want to.
> Króliczek: Because they're mean guys.
> Cornelia: They're so mean that they don't even let us stand there.
> Króliczek: Yes, that's right. They didn't even put me on a list, and everyone has the right to play. They are just hags. Guys are old hags. (Preschool B, 18.12.2006)

Króliczek, a girl herself, uses here an offensive term describing a woman to negatively label boys who do not allow her to play. In her discourse, femininity comes to epitomize what is unwanted, undesirable and of lesser value. At the same time, her awareness of the inequality inscribed in the masculine-feminine opposition could also explain her unwillingness to identify herself as a girl. She was not the only one who utilized the term "hag" to insult others and negatively marked references to femininity could be heard among children. The kids had access to discourses that positioned women and characteristics associated with them as having lower value and being less attractive than men and all that concerned them. One obvious source of such a discourse were the textbooks used which presented men as given more power, responsibility and a higher status than women were. This was conveyed for instance by contexts in which men and women were presented: the former playing a role of a policeman, a firefighter, a doctor, a photographer, a vet, a conductor, an ice-cream vendor, a driver, a bee-keeper, a paramedic or a king, as opposed to a teacher, a gardener, a dentist or a mother/other caretaker which were the only positions open to women. While the textbooks assumed more flexibility and less hierarchical gender differentiation with respect to children's activities, all instructions were formulated in the masculine gender, as if addressed to boys

only, which also reinforced gender imbalance[28]. Seen from this perspective, Króliczek's desire to be a boy/like a boy and her acting in a manner deemed typical of boys can be interpreted as an attempt to position herself as more powerful and influential by joining (or rather pretending to join) a higher status group.

Practices of gender differentiation worked to construct the preschool as a gendered site, abundant in discourses on relationships between girls and boys, on girls' and boys' proper behavior and positions appropriate for them. In a rather troublesome way, some of these discourses produced girls as a disadvantaged category. In Chapters 6 and 8 I will take up the issue of girls' and boys' positions in the social structure of the preschool. However, the processes of the construction of a gendered preschooler call for a much more thorough analysis than I am able to carry out within the scope of this work.

## Asexual children

Asexuality and innocence was another dimension of the category of a proper preschooler constructed in Preschool A. Any behavior that could be interpreted as in some sense sexual tended to be stigmatized with a striking regularity and persistence. Although it was never spelled out, one could easily get the impression that "normal preschoolers" were considered entirely asexual and that in a preschool context there was no room for any occurrences that could have somewhat erotic (in an adult's view) connotations. The following incidents are particularly telling:

> Harcon and Dorota are playing "getting married." Then comes the wedding night and they are "making love." They are lying on the floor holding each other, and Dorota puts her leg on Harcon's leg. Ms Małgorzata notices it and says: "Harcon, leave her alone." Dorota: "We are making love." The teacher:

28 The main textbook used was *Szkoła sześciolatka. Ja i moja szkoła* [The six-year-old's school. I and my school.] by W. Żaba-Żabińska, MAC Edukacja, Kielce 2006. Preschool A used different textbooks (*Wesoła szkoła sześciolatka* [The six-year-old's happy school] by S. Łukasik et. al, WSiP SA, Warszawa 2003, and Wesoła szkoła pięciolatka [The five-year-old's happy school] by M. Walczak et. al, WSiP SA, Warszawa 2006), but they depicted women and men in a similar way. Women could be a teacher, a farmer, a shop assistant, a nurse or a waitress, while men were presented as a forester, a dentist, a doctor, a musician, a bullfighter, a gardener, a miner, a pilot, a bricklayer or a train conductor.

> "So go to a bench after the preschool and make love, but now behave like children." (Preschool A, 13.03.2006)

> The boys undress before nap time. Filip has now only his pants on and lowers them a bit, takes out his penis and shows it to the other boys. They curiously look at it; Filip shows it a couple of times. The teachers look in another direction and only after a while Mrs Zosia notices what the boys are doing, approaches them quickly and takes Filip out of the room. When they are back, Filip is crying a bit. The teacher (to Filip): "You could find another way to show off. Try to take it out once more, and I will cut it off." Then she warns him that if he dares not to sleep, she will tell everything to his dad. (Preschool A, 11.04.2005)

What is striking in the first incident, is the teacher's explicit construction of both a preschool as a place where behavior considered sexual cannot take place, and of a child for whom only a specific range of behavior is prescribed. Therefore children who engage in doings perceived as erotic are considered not only improper, incompetent preschoolers (as they have failed to learn what is allowed in a preschool), but also not quite children. Moreover, the appeal to "behave like a child" is an interesting instrument of preventing children from certain actions. It begs the question as to why it was employed in reference to this particular type of play, while other types that also mirror activities considered atypical of children (e.g. playing war or cooking dinner) did not usually give rise to such a reaction. Possible explanations could be the construction of a child as an asexual being or a "sexual panic," understood as a perception of any erotic (or interpreted as erotic) behavior as unacceptable and alarming. The second incident – given the intensity of the teacher's reaction – could be interpreted as substantiating further the claim that sexual panic might have been at work in the preschool. Importantly in the context of this chapter, the stigmatization of behavior deemed erotic or sexual contributed further to a normative construction of a preschool child as constrained, composed and having control over their body and emotions.

The association of children with innocence and sexual ignorance is not specific to Poland. Foucault's seminal analysis of the history of sexuality in the West (1979b, see also 2003a) featured the figure of the masturbating child as an object of doctors' and teachers' attention from the late 18th century. Kehily and Montgomery (2004) point to vast differences between understandings of children's sexuality characteristic of current Western cultures and those in other parts of the world and historically in the West. Importantly, they point out that the association of children with innocence that prevails in present-day Europe is far from universal. In the Polish context,

research on children and sexuality is still rather scarce and it would certainly be of merit to develop it further.

## Summary

This chapter was an analysis of the construction of a proper child developed in the preschools. I analyzed both official documents and the teachers' discourses (drawing on my interview material), as well as the teachers' daily practice. I argued that rather ambiguous and self-contradictory models emerge from preschool discourses and practices. On one level, both preschools declare child-centeredness and claim adherence to children's needs and interests as guidelines for their practice. On the level of the teachers' discourses, however, both difference and ambiguities emerge. The model of a child that Preschool B teachers construct resembles that which is manifested in official documents: a child as active and resourceful, who will flourish unless harmed by adults. This continuity is missing from Preschool A, as the teachers construct a child as needy, lacking abilities, uncontrollable and dangerous. The constructions become even more complex with the analysis of the teachers' practices. In their daily practice, both preschools emphasize obedience, rule-following, self-inspection and self-control as important features, which is at odds with the model forged in the official documents. While both preschools highlight the practice of self-inspection, the role it plays in the two places differ. In Preschool A it functions as a means of enhancing obedience and adherence to regulations. In Preschool B its aim is to ensure that children realize the consequences of their behavior toward others and can control their actions for the purpose of better group functioning. What the analysis carried out in this chapter indicates is the existence of discontinuities in the model of a child constructed in the preschools. This may be related to changes in discourses about the child, the teachers/adults and educational institutions. I will discuss this problem in more detail in Chapters 5 and 10.

The final part of the chapter was devoted to processes of the construction of a gendered preschooler. I discussed practices of gender differentiation and analyzed the position of girls in each preschool. While the girls in Preschool A seemed to "disappear," some practices observable in Preschool B also point to the girls' underprivileged position.

# 5. Teachers' and children's positions in the generational order of the preschool

> When the focus is not on individual children, but on relations between social groups – children and adults – issues of power, rights and responsibilities become essential ingredients of considering those relationships.
>
> (Mayall 2000: 41)

The objective of this chapter is to analyze the relationships between preschool teachers and children as social groups from the perspective of the positions they take (or are placed in) in the preschool social structure. I draw on Davies and Harre's (1990) notion of positioning, which they understand as "the processes whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines." In their approach, conversation is a form of social interaction, and as such, it has specific social effects (e.g. creating interpersonal relationships). I broaden their concept by including social practices other than conversations that have the same effect of constituting those involved in them as specific subjects. Davies and Harre's theory is situated in the poststructuralist paradigm with its recognition of the constitute power of discourse that is capable of producing subject positions. A subject position enables (or forces) a person to think and act in specific ways, and leads those who take it to perceive the world from the vantage point of that position. Importantly, different discourses produce different subject positions, and also a specific discourse can offer a number of subject positions (Weedon 1997: 106). As a result, a person is not a fixed, stable entity, but rather is constantly reconstituted through discursive practices: "who one is is always an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one's own and others' discursive practices" (Davies 1989: 229). This is the case with preschool teachers, who can position themselves (and be positioned) as, among others, educators, caretakers, authoritative rulers, or privileged adults.

Although positions that preschool teachers take are diverse, they all seem to be embedded in the generational order (Alanen 2001a, 2001b, 2003; Mayall 2000). Generational order is a relatively stable social structure in which

children and adults function as separate social groups, each having a specific status and, related to it, rights, obligations and possibilities (or a lack thereof). Alanen (2003) points out that the relationship between the positions of a child and an adult is usually asymmetrical, and Mayall (2000) takes this point even further, stating plainly that one group (children) is subordinated to the other (adults). Moreover, the subject positions of an adult and a child are relational, i.e., the adult position exists inasmuch as there is the child position – and vice versa – and the meaning of each position can only be established in relation to the other (Alanen 2003). When adult preschool professionals position themselves in a certain way, specific positions (and ways of acting) open up or close for children.

Generational order is constructed in the course of interactions between children and adults who position themselves in certain ways, however, at the same time, it is constitutive of their actions. Generational order, although produced by people, also exists independently of them. It can be understood as a discourse that makes it possible for adults and children to position themselves and each other in specific ways, while preventing them from taking other positions. One must bear in mind therefore, that teachers do not take certain (specifically construed) positions entirely voluntarily – they function within a discursive horizon of what is available to them, i.e., what they consider appropriate.

Although a relatively stable structure, generational order cannot be taken for granted. On the one hand, the fact that individuals can take different subject positions within it at least potentially destabilizes it[29]. Looking at the ways in which preschool professionals position themselves makes it clear. Sometimes the positioning is clearly hierarchical, with adults establishing themselves as privileged, dominant figures and children becoming inferior beings; in other cases the relations are more egalitarian and respectful. On the other hand, while the generational order exists as an objective structure, its specific meaning is only produced in everyday interactions. As Alanen (2003: 41) states, "generational structure" can be understood as the "complex set of social (relational) processes through which some people become (or are 'constructed' as) 'children' while other people become (are 'constructed' as)

29 Weedon (1997: 106) emphasizes that importance of the fact that discourses offer several different subject positions, including the possibility of reversal. Reverse discourses that can be developed on the basis of more marginal or unwanted subject positions can lead to the production of new, resistant discourses which can eventually undermine the power of the dominant discourse.

'adults'." To convey the dynamic aspect of these processes, Mayall (2002: 27) employs the notion of "generationing," thus avoiding the perception of childhood and adulthood as fixed, stable categories. For instance, the fact that teachers occupy a dominant position in the generational structure does not mean that they always hold power – quite the contrary, children pursue numerous strategies to challenge adults' status and win a degree of autonomy. Power, in a Foucaultian perspective, circulates and with it "a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up" (Foucault 1982: 220). From this point of view, generational power structures in the preschool are not something that, once constructed, remain unchanged and unquestioned. To the contrary, they are constantly reestablished through a complex set of instruments that will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

As a social construction, generational order undergoes changes with some positions for children and adults (teachers) becoming possible to adopt while others close. Long-employed ways of relating to children start being questioned, new constructions of the child are being conceived and, as a result, structures in which children and adults are embedded are changing. This implies the need for teachers to reconsider and reestablish their positions in relation to children. The fact that, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, the ways in which the teachers in the two preschools positioned themselves differed, may indicate that such changes are under way. As a result, it could be argued that not all positions were equally easy for the teachers to take: in fact, positioning themselves in certain ways might have entailed a degree of tension for them while other positions might have offered them a sense of confidence and security. Throughout this chapter I will be pointing to such moments of tension and uneasiness resulting from ongoing changes, and I will discuss this issue in more detail in Chapter 10.

As I mentioned, the positions that teachers took and the exact shape of the generational order developed on that basis were not the same in both preschools. The differences can be attributed, for instance, to distinct constructions of a child and an adult, as well as of child-adult relations, that informed adults' actions in these institutions (as discussed in Chapter 4). At the same time, however, despite all the differences, daily practice in both preschools was marked by the same fundamental feature: the understanding that if "you are bigger, you can do whatever you want" while when "someone is in a kindergarten, they can't do whatever they want," as one girl put. In the most general sense, preschool reality in both places was one of a hierarchical

order in which the group located at the top of the hierarchy was much more powerful – and ready to use all the resources available to it on the basis of its position – than that located at the bottom.

## Position 1: Teachers as distinct from children

> The children are practicing a new song; they have to repeat the lyrics. Przemek is not doing it. The teacher notices it and shouts at him, telling him to repeat. He responds that he does not want to. The teacher: "What does it mean that you don't want to? Come here, you'll be repeating right now! Practice!" Przemek: "I don't want to." The teacher: "If you don't, I'll take you out straight away. It is the teacher who rules here and not the children ruling over me. Now!" (Preschool A, 11.04.2005)

One of the most common ways in which the teachers positioned themselves in relation to children was constituting themselves as a distinct group: not only different from children, but also as enjoying a privileged status. Among a wide range of strategies used to achieve such a position, the most explicit one consisted in emphasizing their role of rulers, as indicated in the above excerpt. Such statements served as the most categorical and straightforward means for the teachers to construct a hierarchical power structure in which they constituted themselves as being in an authority position. Given the relational character of positioning, in order for the teachers to rule there had to be children who could be given orders and expected to abide by them, and references to ruling precluded the possibility of negotiation, of dialog, and of children having a voice. The fact that teachers positioned themselves as authority figures having the power to rule also meant that they constructed themselves as not only having the right to influence children's behavior, but also – by virtue of their location in the social structure of the preschool – deserving respect. The following quote illustrates how this special status operated:

> Ms Malgorzata: "Who do you think you have in front of you? Everyone, put your hands on your knees, close your mouth and sit like this until lunch." (Preschool A, 7.04.2005)

The teacher responded to the children's disobedience by emphasizing her unique position (as if reminding children that they were not dealing with their peer) and using it to force children to act in a specific way. References to

teachers' distinctness from children and their entitlement to special rights were numerous, and served to reinforce the adults' privileged status as those who had to be obeyed and who could legitimately force children to undertake certain actions (or prevent them from doing this):

> Ms Zosia: "I am reading now. You are to count. You have to learn that when a teacher is speaking, you are listening." (Preschool A, 6.03.2007)

> Several kids put up their hands, they say that they want to respond. The teacher says that she's not interested in who wants what; it is her who calls on children. (Preschool B, 26.04.2005)

The teachers' special position was reinforced by the spatial organization of the room. Teachers had their own desks, bigger than children's tables and overlooking the whole room, to which the kids in principle had no access without being explicitly invited. The teachers usually ate their meals there, rather than joining the children[30]. Children could also be scolded or even spanked for taking anything from the desk without a teacher's permission. "They won't rummage through the teacher's desk," explained Ms Małgorzata from Preschool A. At the same time, I observed teachers open kids' own drawers and take items they needed from them. Such an explicitly expressed asymmetry functioned as a powerful means of constructing the hierarchical order. The same result was achieved by a linguistic means of differentiated addressing forms: in line with Polish language usage, adults addressed children by their first names (and sometimes, in Preschool A, in a somewhat

30 The importance of the teacher's own desk as a personal space and a status symbol in Polish preschools is consistently observed in research (Siarkiewicz 2000: 133, Falkiewicz-Szult 2007: 119-121). Zwiernik (1996: 87) in her analysis of the functioning of traditional preschools and an experimental alternative preschool called Wrocław Preschool of the Future points to differences that resulted from the fact that in the alternative preschool the teacher did not have her own desk. The teacher was close to children, responding to their questions or carrying out casual conversations with them, as well as eating meals with them at one table. She concludes that in the alternative preschool the teacher was among the children or together with them, while in the traditional ones the teacher was beside the children or for them. The disappearance of a teacher's desk, however, can also be interpreted to indicate that power operated in a different way. In such arrangements power becomes invisible and less likely to prompt resistance. As such, is becomes even more effective in producing children as specific subjects.

derogatory, and certainly depersonalized, manner by their last names) while children used a form of "Ms/Mrs"[31] to address their teachers.
Teachers' privileged position vis-à-vis children was further reinforced by openly forbidding children to interrupt or enter adults' conversations. When Harcon approached teachers who were sitting at a table having their lunch, he was told to leave; Ms Agnieszka in Preschool B in turn stated that children "have this custom of chiming in when adults talk. And this is not nice." Situations when children were made to wait for staff members to finish their conversations before they were allowed to ask a question or make a comment were frequent. On the one hand, this could be perceived as teaching children to abide by a general rule of taking turns in a conversation and refraining from interrupting others, which the kids were often reminded about. Yet, as it was with the differentiated access to personal spaces, here as well teachers granted themselves the right to interrupt children's conversations or play, which again reveals an imbalance in child-adult relations. While adults could step into what was considered the children's sphere any time they wanted, a reverse relation was illegitimate. Through such practices the child-adult dichotomy was effectively reproduced.

In its most extreme form, the teachers' position as being distinct from children and enjoying special rights manifested itself in their use of physical force to coerce children into undertaking specific actions. I have already pointed to this issue in Chapter 3 and I will take it up again in more detail in the following chapter. Here I want to emphasize that acts such as physically forcing a child to move to a certain spot, preventing them from moving, shaking them or spanking them were possibly the most powerful indication of the teachers' position as privileged members of the preschool environment. Importantly, such practices of positioning were virtually absent from Preschool B: even though, as I have already indicated, the teachers there did establish their status as distinct from children, they, for the most part, refrained from using physical violence as a means of reinforcing it.

Employing physical power to position themselves as distinct from children and dominant was one of the most problematic ways of constructing the teachers' status in relation to children. Given the widespread belief that adults have the right (or even obligation) to direct children's behavior, which

31 The word they were using, i.e., "Mrs" or "Ms" (no distinction in Polish), functioned as a colloquial substitute of the word "teacher." In fact the word "teacher" as such was rarely used in the preschool, especially in interactions among children or between children and adults.

sometimes entails resorting to rather drastic methods, such a way of constituting one's own position and relating to children might have appeared almost natural and the teachers could easily fall back on it. At the same time, the more and more powerful discourse on children's rights and respect for their dignity renders the use of physical power to make children comply with adults' commands highly questionable. The teachers were aware of that and their determined attempts to explain their own problematic actions are the clearest indication of it (see Chapter 3). As a result, taking such a position had rather ambiguous consequences: on the one hand, being a long-known practice, it could give the teachers a sense of confidence. On the other hand, giving the teachers' awareness of the inappropriateness of such behavior, displaying it could as well lead to their feeling of inadequacy and failure as proper teachers. I will return to the issue of the teachers' tension and insecurity associated with changes in ways in which they could relate to children in Chapter 10.

## Position 2: Teachers as special adults (distinct from parents)

Apart from positioning themselves as distinct from children, teachers constituted themselves as distinct from other adults, in particular from those that children knew from their family contexts. The following two quotes illustrate this well:

> Ms Zosia grabs Harry and moves him to another seat. He starts crying. Ms Zosia says to him: "You can cry, it doesn't bother me, but go to the bathroom because I have a headache." She reminds him: "Start obeying. You can do such tricks to your mom, not to me here." (Preschool A, 31.05.2006)

> Niko makes a face. Ms Małgorzata: "And why are you frowning? You can make such faces to your mom." (Preschool A, 15.02.2007).

Such comments could be heard when children acted in a way that was incongruent with what was considered proper behavior of a "normal" preschooler, i.e., when they expressed disrespect for adults, acted "wild" (for instance did not sufficiently control their bodies and emotions or played in a manner perceived by a teacher as dangerous) or openly rebelled. Positioning themselves as different from children's usual caretakers (mainly mothers,

sometimes grandmothers, never fathers), the teachers seemed to be drawing on an image of a softhearted mom who accepts her child's disobedience in order to establish their own status as those who act reasonably and need to be respected and obeyed unconditionally. In this process they also constructed the ideal of a preschool as a place that is different from home: one in which there are rules and regulations that cannot be breached and that are protected by adults functioning as guards[32]. Such a construction of both the preschool institution and the teacher is quite significant as it remains rather incompatible with the often expressed ideal of a teacher modeled after a mother, i.e., someone who is capable of forging an intimate relationship with a child, getting to know their needs and attending to them, who is compassionate, forgiving and understanding. Statements such as those quoted above serve to openly reject such an ideal and position a teacher as a strict, exacting and uncompromising officer who, like Ms Zosia in the first excerpt, easily disregards children's emotions.

The status of teachers as strict guardians whose relationship with children was unlike that that their mothers had with them was further reinforced by a clearly visible element of fear marking child-adult interactions in preschools. It was manifested, for instance, by frequently threatening children with making them sit next to a teacher if they kept on misbehaving, as illustrated by the following example:

> Weronika, Maks and Rafal are sitting on a carpet. Ms Zosia: "Come to me here right now!" Weronika does not move, the teacher approaches her, takes her hand and pulls her to a place next to her chair. (Preschool A, 18.05.2006)

Through such practices teachers positioned themselves as someone to be avoided. They conveyed the message that being in their proximity was a form of punishment. In a sense, they constructed themselves as an instrument of punishment. Obviously, the rationale behind such actions was to prevent children from getting involved in acts deemed improper by making them stay under close surveillance of the teacher. Still, by doing so, the teachers

32 It is worth mentioning that the construction of a preschool unlike home stands in stark contrast to what Gulløv (2003) identifies as one of driving ideologies behind Danish daycare institutions: in the light of an underlying assumption that families and homes are the right place for children, these institutions are filled with symbols referring to home and are turned into places resembling home. She points out, however, that kindergartens are places marked with contrasts, and while they might be attempting to imitate home, institutional arrangements typical of them render such attempts unlikely to be entirely successful.

simultaneously constituted themselves as, first, dominant, controlling and ensuring order, and, second, as those from outside the children's own world in which they could engage in actions they found enjoyable and pleasant.

The flip side of the practice of teachers' establishing themselves as a threat was positioning children as those who should be – and were – afraid of the staff. The fear of the adults in the preschool was openly expressed by Preschool A children, like in this example:

> Basia and another girl from group 3 are sitting next to me. Basia wants to draw in my notebook. I tell her that I need it right now and suggest that she could take a sheet of paper and draw on it. She first gets up, quite happy about this idea, but then says that they won't be allowed to take crayons because this is not their group. I encourage both of them to still go ahead and ask, but they look rather insecure. The other girl asks Basia whether to go; Basia responds that she doesn't know. The girl gets up and makes few steps, but then gives up and sits down again. Basia says that she won't go because she's afraid. I ask her what she is afraid of and she says: "That the teacher will scold me." (Preschool A, 26.06.2007)[33]

The fear of being punished by a teacher could not only prevent children from undertaking activities that in themselves were entirely legitimate when ordered by the staff, but also from even making an attempt to obtain permission. The image of a teacher that emerges from the girls' account is one of an authority figure whose objective is to ensure that rules be abided by and to mete out punishment if they are broken; who will not be willing to make any exceptions for the purpose of fulfilling children's wishes, and someone who is so determined to keep these principles that approaching her with a request is bound to result in chastisement. Practices through which teachers became positioned as frightening figures can certainly be considered one of the most powerful instruments of reinforcing hierarchical relations between preschool children and adults.

Obviously, not all children and not always behaved the way Basia and her friend did. Since relations of power entail opening up a whole range of responses, there could be other reactions. For instance, Alladynka revealed to me that she was not afraid of approaching me while Anita, who was worried

33 The fact that Preschool A children were afraid of their teachers appears particularly problematic in light of Ms Zosia's declaration that what she considers very important in her relationships with children is their development of a sense of security in the preschool as well as of trust in teachers. While the example quoted above concerns another teacher, the notion of children being afraid of their teachers was present in the preschool.

that the teacher would notice it and would shout at her, was. The threat of being punished prevented some children from acting the way they would like to, but it could also – and often did – make them devise counter-strategies that would enable them to pursue their ideas. Just as the development of the generational structure entails a variety of subject positions the adults could take, it also opened up different options for the children, resistance certainly being one of them.

## Implications of the teachers' position as privileged adults for children

If adulthood and childhood are relational categories defined in reference to each other, the privileged status of adults needs to have its counterpart in children's inferior position. Some of the incidents already discussed point to practices whereby children's inferiority in the hierarchical generational order was established, yet there were other, more striking means of positioning children in this way. While the hierarchical structure was clearly visible in both institutions, it was Preschool A where it prevailed in the most explicit forms. Discursive practices employed there resulted in positioning children as, among others, incomplete human beings. Obviously, such a position was never explicitly articulated since in the official discourse of the preschools children functioned as full persons. They could be conceived as very sensitive and requiring love and care, as individuals who perhaps need help from the adults to develop their full and abilities, but nonetheless as much a human being as an adult. The rhetoric of the preschool official documents, based on the philosophy of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, also made this clear. Yet, in many cases adults' interactions with children were marked by disrespect and contempt that would never be a part of adult-adult interactions. Staff members could be seen either actively humiliating children or acting as if children had not been there or were mere objects. Such practices often involved the children's bodies, as in this excerpt:

> Children are lining up at the door, ready to leave. The group 3 teacher appears and wants to enter the room. She walks straight at the kids and, without saying a word, jostles through them. (Preschool A, 10.04.2007)[34]

34 The preschool personnel were not the only ones to approach children in this manner. During events for parents I observed adults who would move children standing in the way of a picture they wanted to take. Without asking children to

Such visual illustrations of the unspoken assumption that children did not require full respect were not infrequent and also included instances of an aide throwing silverware on children's tables rather than setting it down or handing it to children, as well as a whole range of means of verbal humiliation, such as the following:

> A teacher: "Ewa, are you deaf or what? Eat, don't talk!" (Preschool A, 7.04.2005)

> The aide brings in food; Scooby Doo shouts for joy. The aide: "Shut your mouth." (Preschool A, 29.06.2007)

It is highly unlikely that any of the staff members would address another adult in such a manner. Yet, in preschool daily practice such highly contemptuous phrases appeared entirely acceptable when directed at children. In a similar vein, children could be addressed in a manner that suggested that they were silly and deprived of basic skills ("You can't even sit cross-legged and listen. You can't comprehend normal simple commands," in Ms Patrycja's words).

However, there was still another, more fundamental way of constituting children as lacking full human capabilities, and it had to do with questioning their ability to make ethical decisions. Mayall (2002: 87) emphasizes how problematic it is for adults used to thinking in the framework of developmental psychology to take children's moral agency seriously, and daily preschool life was a rich source of incidents confirming this observation. The following is one of the most telling examples:

> Subaru and Cyprian get into an argument. It turns out that Subaru has cut Cyprian's lip with a toy and Cyprian is bleeding now. Ms Małgorzata calls Subaru; he does not want to come to her and apologizes to Cyprian. The teacher says that this is not enough; Cyprian's lip is bleeding and Subaru can't just think that "I'm sorry" will do. She wants both of them to go with her to the kitchen where Cyprian's grandma works so that Subaru apologizes to Cyprian there, in front of his grandma. Subaru says that he has already apologized to Cyprian, Ms Małgorzata responds: "But this is not enough! His lip is cut! Do you think 'I'm sorry' will do?" She takes both boys to the kitchen; Subaru is crying and trying to resist, but finally goes, led by the teacher. (Preschool A, 28.02.2007)

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change places, the adult would simply push them aside. This indicates that the lack of respect towards children that was noticeable in the preschool was a reflection of a wider cultural tendency.

Mayall (2000: 49) points out that "adult conceptualisations of children as incomplete people and adult assumptions that their own agendas matter more that children's lead to them downgrading children as moral agents." The situation quoted is a clear demonstration of how this happens. The fact that a child apologized to another for hurting him was not considered sufficient by the teacher; another adult as a final instance of legitimating and validating the child's apology was deemed necessary in order to render the act meaningful. This reveals the teacher's underlying understanding of children as incomplete persons whose actions do not count, as well as those who are incapable of solving their own conflicts on their own (or, even if they appear to be, it is not perceived as meaningful). In this incident, Subaru attempted to position himself as a moral agent: having hurt Cyprian, he immediately and voluntarily apologized to him. Yet, the teacher did not perceive this act as valid and she insisted on additional reparation (which clearly took the form of punishing Subaru). In so doing, she questioned not only Subaru's moral agency, but also that of Cyprian, foreclosing the possibility of him accepting Subaru's apology and the boys settling the issue on their own. The situation ended with the teacher telling Subaru – who kept on crying for a long time – that "the grandmother came to terms with that fact that something like this can happen." Clearly, she rejected the possibility of only Cyprian accepting it, as if his own experience and decision remained meaningless until mediated by an adult. In this way, not only did she draw on the discourse of children as morally incompetent, but further reinforced such a construction, emphasizing children's status as morally underdeveloped and in need of an adult's intervention.

## Position 3: Teachers as caretakers

The two positions that the teachers could take discussed above resulted in constructing a clear-cut hierarchical structure in which the children were positioned as distinct from, and inferior to, adults. Yet there were other positions that opened up the possibility of establishing different, more egalitarian and respectful relationships between children and adults. One of them was the position of a caretaker. Talking about preschool teachers as caretakers is problematic, not least because the teachers' own perspective on this position was far from unambiguous. On the one hand, they pointed to the importance of sensitivity toward children, of caring for them, listening to

them and supporting them emotionally when they need it – very much, as some of them explicitly stated, like a mother does[35]. On the other hand, however, they correctly recognized the low status socially ascribed to care work and emphasized that they were teachers, and not simply caretakers. Nonetheless, caring for children was an important aspect of their work and I frequently witnessed incidents of teachers in both preschools holding children, comforting them, helping them dress or tie their shoelaces when they had difficulties with it or assisting them in solving problems.

Teachers acting as caretakers attended to children's emotions. They emphasized the importance of children's emotional well-being in the group and undertook various steps to ensure that they felt good. For instance, at the beginning of the children's second year of preschool, Ms Zosia (who just started working with this group) introduced a practice that gave the children a chance to reveal their feelings using a teddy bear who they talked to during circle time. Ms Agnieszka used a whole range of symbolic means to establish rapport with children and improve atmosphere in the group. She addressed children by diminutive names[36], gave them heart-shaped stickers on St. Valentine's Day because, as she said, she liked them a lot or asked children to make drawings for newcomers to the group to make them feel welcome. A program aimed at reducing aggression implemented by Preschool A teachers can also be interpreted as their attempt to position themselves as caretakers, undertaking steps to make children feel better in the group. Different relaxation techniques that the teachers used with the children to help them calm down and rest were part of the program.

At the core of the position of the teacher as a caretaker was the willingness and ability to develop respectful relations with children and avoid positing them as inferior, which could be achieved by refraining from forcing children to do anything and shouting at them. This entailed the teacher's ability to recognize her own dominance. For instance, Ms Agnieszka, when reflecting on her own behavior, realized that she was stressed out and shouting at kids, who, as a result, must have been afraid of her.

35 The association of institutionalized childcare with motherhood is widespread. Cameron *et. al* (1999) claim that childcare is modeled on, or perceived as substituting, mother-care, which, in their view, poses serious problems for men working with young children.

36 In Polish, an inflectional language, it is possible to change the word form in order to change is connotations. This goes for names too. The use of diminutive names, rather than full names, conveys friendliness and affection, and is the nicest way of addressing others.

It is important here to recognize the ambiguity of such a position. On the one hand, when teachers acted as caretakers, it contributed to a change in the power relations in the group. By treating children in the same manner as they would treat adults – with respect, attending to their needs, and supporting or helping them when they asked her for it – they practically undermined their inferior status of incomplete human beings, distinct from adults. At the same time, they acted on the recognition of the fact that children, given their age and experience, have not yet developed certain capabilities and, consequently, needed adults' assistance. This is where the position of teachers as caretakers reveals its ambiguity, especially when interpreted from the perspective of Foucault's notion of the pastor-flock relationship.

As Foucault (2007: 127) says, "Pastoral power is a power of care. It looks after the flock, it looks after the individuals of the flock, it sees to it that the sheep do not suffer, it goes in search of those that have strayed of course, and it treats those that are injured." Making sure that children feel good in the preschool, that they are emotionally and physically well can be perceived as an expression of the teachers' pastoral power. Yet, responding to children's needs and looking after them can easily slide into ensuring that they do what the pastor perceives as beneficial to them or necessary for – in Foucault's vocabulary – their salvation. Thus, making sure that children are not hungry could amount to keeping them at a table until they have eaten enough, while taking care of their safety could be tantamount to preventing them from playing freely. The position of a caretaker was embedded in the safety discourse (whose role in the preschool I discuss in more detail in Chapter 10), and as a result, seeing to children's well-being could give rise to constraining them, preventing them from being independent and having personal space. Taking care of the children could therefore mean not only ensuring that nothing bad happens to them, that their needs are satisfied and that they do not harm themselves or each other, but also surveilling them, following their every step and seriously limiting their autonomy. With the sovereign being the other face of the pastor, child-adult relations based on care appear far from unequivocal.

As it was with the position of the teacher as a special, privileged adult distinct from children, establishing themselves as caretakers also entailed a degree of tension for the adults who tried to take it. The safety discourse severely constrained the teachers, rendering the move from the pastor dimension of the care-based position to that of the sovereign very easy. The teachers had to handle their anxiety emerging from their sense of

responsibility for the children's well-being, enhanced by an increasingly intensive child-protection discourse and the children's greater (at least in the teachers' view) need for autonomy. As I will show in Chapter 10, positioning oneself under such circumstances presented a considerable challenge for the teachers.

## Position 4: Teachers as educators

Relationships in which the preschool staff members positioned themselves as educators responsible for children's cognitive development are at least as ambiguous as those in which they constituted themselves as caretakers. Importantly, the status of an educator was one that the teachers particularly aspired to. Not willing to be identified only as caretakers, they insisted on the significance of the educational aspect of their work. Ms Małgorzata's words illustrate it clearly:

> [Parents don't understand] that we want to give the child something else than just play. Many of them would think that preschool is only about play, no need to learn, because the child just absorbs everything by themselves. But no, everything has to be given to the child. [A parent] thinks that if one turns on the TV or the computer at home, the child will just learn everything. But this is not the correct way because the child has to learn through different means. (Ms Małgorzata, Preschool A, interview, 2007)

Ms Małgorzata positions herself here as a professional having expertise in the field of child learning. Unlike many parents, she knows what children's cognitive needs are and is capable of responding to them appropriately in her daily practice. Such an attitude was shared by other teachers who often complained bitterly about parents' inability to recognize the amount of teaching (as opposed to mere supervision of children's play) that went on in the preschool. Importantly, the position of teachers as educators corresponded to what the children expressed as their expectation. Many kids, especially in Preschool B, wanted their teachers to actually *teach* them certain skills and provide them with information, and appreciated the knowledge and abilities they acquired. Preschool A children took great pride in being able to say several words and phrases in English – a skill that the majority of their relatives most likely did not have given their social and educational backgrounds,. Preschool B children were working on their literacy skills from the age of four; by the end of the preschool many of them could read

fluently. Being able to read helped them position themselves as agents: they could decide themselves what and when to read and were independent of adults in that respect. The most proficient kids were also rather popular in the group as they could take up the role usually played by a teacher and read out books to other children. In this way the teachers provided children with skills, information and knowledge they wanted to acquire and were interested in; they stimulated them intellectually and helped them develop capabilities the kids valued highly. By doing so, they boosted their self-confidence and, in some cases, enabled them to become more of an agent.

Yet Ms Małgorzata's statement clearly reveals tension inscribed in the generational order in which adults assume the status of educators. Her emphasis on the need to "give the child everything" serves to position children as passive recipients of the teacher's instructions who cannot develop intellectually without adults providing them with knowledge. Furthermore, even though the children made it clear that they valued their own agency and the ability to choose what and when to learn[37], the adults had full control over children's learning. First, the teachers followed externally-designed programs specifying which topics to discuss and which skills to work on[38]. Second, children – in particular in Preschool A – often complained about being forced to study. I witnessed incidents of children crying because they did not want to practice reading or writing, or doing their tasks rather carelessly in order to finish sooner. At the same time, however, I observed teachers scold children for undertaking educational activities on their own (as was the case of Zak and Ben, who were rebuked for approaching a wall map on which they wanted to find cities they were talking about, or of Harcon, who would start independently working in his letter book) or failing to respond to children's cognitive interests (such as their interest in reading and writing before the age when first literacy activities were scheduled). In such cases teachers' acts of positioning themselves as educators amounted to reinforcing children's subordinated status and their dependence on the adults' decisions.

37 This resonates with Mayall's (2002: 78) observations from a London primary school where children, who usually found school boring, enjoyed the most those moments when they could be, in her words, "active and agentic": when they studied on their own or when they were engaged in activities whereby they could actually accomplish something.

38 Apart from following such programs, teachers also implemented programs developed at their preschools, in particular having to do with art or health protection. In Preschool B Ms Agnieszka started working on children's literacy skills on her own initiative two years ahead of schedule.

In Preschool A the position of children as imperfect and incompetent learners was strengthened by the staff members' explicit announcements of the children's lack of certain abilities or their not being sufficiently intelligent. While officially – for instance during events for parents – the children were praised for their achievements, in everyday practice they could be referred to as those who were more likely to fail than to succeed. I heard a teacher scold them and state "how dumb those kids are." During rehearsals of a dance or a song, the teachers tended to listen carefully and immediately point out every mistake a child would make. In one, rather significant, incident, following the children's public performance about which they had been very nervous, the teacher said: "I have to praise you. But of course you made a mistake. X [a child's last name] made a mistake." Using such means, the teachers effectively positioned children as doomed to failure, undermining their confidence and trust in their own abilities. Perhaps not surprisingly, therefore, I observed incidences such as the following:

> Children are assembling words from syllables. Maks says that he is stupid and can't make any words. I tell him that he is not stupid and that he has already made three words. He responds by saying that Ms Małgorzata did it. Then he repeats several times: "I can't. I can't do anything." (Preschool A, 10.04.2007)

Unlike Preschool A children – doubting their capabilities and often hostile toward learning – their counterparts in Preschool B were often praised by their teachers to be smart, intelligent and successful. Staff members also reassured them about their skills:

> The aide comes in; she sees children's drawings and says that they are really nice. Ms Agnieszka says that the children had doubts about whether they could draw, but they did it so well. (Preschool B, 28.03.2006)

These different approaches to children's work and abilities demonstrate the different configurations of child-adult relations and the range of subject positions opened to children and adults. Adults' practices could lead to reinforcing children's status as imperfect and inferior: lacking basic capacities, prone to error, unable to cope with challenges, dependent on teachers for help, or to positioning them as self-confident, capable, enthusiastic about their learning and often agentic. In this way, the hierarchical relations based on distinct positions of knowledgeable teachers who instruct and assess children, and children as skillful recipients of that teaching, are either strengthened or challenged.

Preschool A children appeared to be quite aware of the position of power in which being a teacher placed the adults. As Subaru confessed to me, he did not like Ms Zosia because, as he put it, "she is always so mean to us. Because she always says 'Read this! Read this! Read this'" – mimicking the teacher's shrieking, raised voice. Even more revealing were incidents when children played the school, like in the following situation:

> The girls (acting as teachers) ask for English equivalents of Polish words and then give stickers to children who answer correctly. One of them shouts: "Sit down on the carpet! Sit down on the carpet! She's not reading! Kasia, read! Anita, come to me please!" Weronika (as a teacher) urges children to read or look at the pictures. (Preschool A, 10.04.2007)

The girls playing teachers enacted what they perceived as appropriate teacher's behavior: telling children where to sit, what to do, disciplining them for not following instructions, or shouting at them. In the kids' reenactment of a teaching situation, just like in Subaru's description of Ms Zosia's behavior, child-teacher relations appear to be constructed around distinct and unequal positions of a dominating teacher and subordinating children.

Such a positioning of the teachers becomes even more visible as far as their role of those responsible for children's socialization is concerned. In Mayall's (2002) view, the perception of children as being in need of socializing – common among adults, but also accepted by children – is one of the main factors contributing to establishing children's minority status. Preschool children were constantly taught the rules of the society in which they lived: how they should interact with others, what behavior is considered appropriate and what is not, as well as the roles of adults and children, and of girls and boys. Teachers also worked to introduce children to the sphere of religious (specifically, the Roman Catholic church) practices. Both preschools, like a vast majority of Polish educational institutions, offered separate religion classes attended by children whose parents explicitly expressed their will for their children to do so (which in itself reinforces children's subordinated status in relation to adults). Religion, however, was a constantly present dimension of daily preschool life. Both institutions celebrated major Christian holidays, such as Christmas and Easter, while teachers customarily talked with their kids about other ones; in Preschool A they discussed at length the death of Pope John Paul II. Children were never consulted on these issues, with religion and religious practices being presented as a natural dimension of social life.

In their analysis of various approaches to childhood, James, Jenks and Prout (1998: 22) mention the conception of the "socially developing child." In

this "transitional theorizing," as they categorize it, children are perceived as objects of socialization: as those who need to get to know social norms and to learn to abide by them. In the classical socialization theory "the child is portrayed, like the laboratory rat, as being at the mercy of external stimuli: passive and conforming. Lost in a social maze it is the adult who offers directions," as Prout and James (1997: 13) vividly remind us. Other versions of socialization theory presume a child's greater participation in the socialization process, yet what remains constant is the perception of a child as someone who is on their way toward developing into an adult as an end form; as "becoming" rather than "being" (James, Jenks and Prout 1998: 207)[39]. It could be argued that the analysis of child-teacher relations centered around the notions of teachers as caretakers and mentors fits into this line of thinking, and as such, the relations examined can be perceived as much as reinforcing the existing hierarchical generational order, as providing an alternative.

## Summary

In this chapter I attempted to demonstrate the diversity and ambiguity of subject positions open to children and adults as they interacted. The general framework of their interactions was the generational order in which children and adults were positioned as having distinct statuses and differentiated access to power. Adult preschool staff had the power to influence children's actions, impose their own values on them and disregard their interests or preferences. This was particularly clear when the teachers took the positions of privileged adults, distinct from children and other adults that children knew. By doing so, they reinforced children's inferior status, and child-teacher relations appeared to be clearly hierarchical and inequitable, based on the principle of the rule of

39 In his later work, Prout (2005: 66) discussed problems related to thinking about childhood in terms of dichotomies, including that of children as beings vs. children as becomings, pointing out that both children and adults can increasingly be perceived as simultaneously beings and becomings, and that the emphasis on children as beings can lead to perceiving them as autonomous, independent individuals rather than interrelated with and interdependent on others. Walkerdine (2004: 101) also observes that the construction of adulthood as stable and childhood as unstable is a product of power. Stability and rationality of (adult) subjects are needed for liberal government to function, thus the need to construct adulthood's stability.

the older and the subordination of the younger. Yet, some ways in which adults and children interacted (with adults taking the positions of a caretaker or educator) opened up the possibility of more egalitarian relationships in which children could be positioned as respected, competent and resourceful.

Generational order, even though fairly stable and of easily recognizable contours, is not unchangeable. Along with the changes in the construction of the child has come the (need for) rearrangement of child-adult relations. This, in turn, has had a direct impact on the positions available for teachers and children. Such changes could be perceived as contributing to the teachers' sense of insecurity, lack of self-confidence and vulnerability. I will discuss these issues in more detail in Chapter 10.

Children rarely accepted their subordinated status unconditionally. Instead, they frequently challenged the teachers' attempts to position them as powerless and dominated. In the process, they often succeeded in questioning the adults' dominance, rendering them relatively vulnerable. Techniques that children employed to counter adults' attempts to subjugate them will be discussed in Chapter 8. In Chapter 6 and 7 I focus on the means whereby the teachers established their position as dominant adults.

# 6. Construction of child-adult relations through techniques of power

> We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it "excludes," it "represses," it "censors," it "abstracts," it "masks," it "conceals." In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production.
>
> (Foucault 1979a: 194)

The preceding chapters dealt with the constructions of children and teachers in preschools. Now I want to concentrate on the ways of producing these constructions. As the analysis so far has demonstrated, children and adults were positioned in a hierarchical generational order: the teachers constituted themselves as dominant and in control of the preschool world, while children were expected to subordinate and act in the way the staff wanted them to act. The generational order both informed ways in which adults and children positioned themselves, and was constantly reproduced through interactions between them. The means of reconstructing the generational order were, to employ Foucault's (1979) terminology, techniques of disciplinary power. In his account, disciplinary power is a new form of power in which a visible, direct rule of a "sovereign" or "king" is replaced with invisible coercion targeted at a the body. It is not concerned simply with punishing one's misdeeds, but with controlling all their steps and making them act in a desired manner. Its ultimate aim is to produce individualized, efficient and productive subjects (Foucault 1980c: 104). Disciplinary power works through a number of techniques such as distribution, surveillance, assessment, ranking or normalization. Foucault analyzed the operation of disciplinary power in relation to institutions such as army camps, factories, prisons – places where "people were gathered together *en masse*, but by this very fact they could be observed as entities both similar to and different from one another" (Rose 1999: 135). However, as Gore (1995; 1998) demonstrates, techniques of power are also in force in educational institutions, and so they were in the preschools I studied.

As the opening quote from *Discipline and Punish* suggests, what is particularly important in Foucault's approach to power is perceiving it as productive. As he observes,

> Power would be a fragile thing if its only function were to repress, if it worked only through the mode of censorship, exclusion, blockage and repression, in the manner of great Superego, exercising itself only in a negative way. If, on the contrary, power is strong this is because, as we are beginning to realise, it produces effects at the level of desire – and also at the level of knowledge.
>
> (Foucault 1980a: 59)

Most importantly, power constitutes subjects; it "reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives" (Foucault 1980d: 39). Through observing and controlling people, making them act in a specific way or comparing then with others, power also establishes them as subjects. Techniques of power that operated in the preschool could therefore be perceived as serving multiple functions of simultaneously producing the generational order and constituting subjects inscribed in it. What particularly interests me in this context is the role these techniques of power played in constructing the normative ideal of a preschooler, as discussed in Chapter 4.

As I will show, most of these techniques – such as distribution, surveillance, assessment, ranking or control over children's bodies – were common for both preschools. Some, however, were more typical of only one of the places or took slightly different forms in each of them. The most telling difference is that of the use of physical power: rare in Preschool B and frequently observable in Preschool A. As a result, it could be argued that the specific forms of the techniques of power used in each preschool led to the construction of somewhat different children: subordinate and constrained in Preschool A and, to some extent, responsible and self-governing in Preschool B. However, the hierarchical generational order, with children having a minority group status, to use Mayall's (2002) expression, was easily discernible in both places.

## Distribution

Disciplinary power works on the basis of the principle of distribution of individuals that operates through enclosure and partitioning (Foucault 1979a:

141-143). Both these techniques are used in a preschool, a closed institution separated from the world around it and having its own rules and order. The principle of distribution is manifested already in the division of children into age groups (3-, 4-, 5- and 6-year olds) and assigning specific rooms to each of them (which means that children move from one room to another, as they progress from the "kiddies" to the "oldest"). In line with the ideals of classroom teaching involving "grouping by age and the necessity of fitting the lesson to the age" (Walkerdine 1984: 168), such a division itself is emblematic of children's subordinated status in the generational order. Organizing preschool children into age groups – a practice informed by the developmental perspective based on the assumption that children move through sequential stages and specific age groups share needs and abilities, hence the necessity of arranging children into age cluster in order to most effectively cater to them (cf. Walsh 2005) – was forced on the kids who might have as well preferred to divide themselves differently (given the fact that many of them had friends or siblings in other groups). Yet, just as in most cases it was not up to the children themselves to decide whether or not to attend the preschool[40], it was not them who decided which group they would be assigned to and with whom they would share the bulk of their time. Moreover, such a division functioned as a powerful means of introducing children to a reality based on hierarchical arrangements. Children were learning that moving from one group to another meant progressing and entailed becoming perceived as more respectable (more mature and reliable) and more intelligent; as well as having more rights and privileges (such as playing on a playground considered by Preschool B children the more attractive of the two available ones, using special playground equipment or not having to take a nap). The perception of positively valued movement through higher and higher stages as one grows had its reflection in the children's practice of employing terms referring to younger children (such as "baby" or "little one") in order to offend or humiliate the other kids. The hierarchical age-based division of children was also crucial to the success of a form of punishment consisting in sending a misbehaving child to a younger group, perceived by the children as one of the harshest penalties.

40 Only one out of nineteen parents in Preschool A and three out of twenty two parents in Preschool B claimed that their child started preschool because he or she wanted to (and never was it the only reason). In general the decision whether to attend the preschool or not, as well as which particular institution, did not belong to the children.

Distribution of kids was also visible in assigning them to specific seats: everyone had their own place at a table which they were not supposed to change. Sometimes the children would be allowed to decide on their own where they wanted to sit and with whom (as it happened in the final year in Preschool A); at other times it would be the teacher to decide (the case of Preschool B), which is another indication of the children's inferior position in the power structures of the preschool. Adult staff openly expressed their right to modify the sitting arrangement ("Where are you sitting? Is this the place I gave you? Please sit here.") if they deemed it desirable from the perspective of group functioning or particular kids' personal achievements. Ms Zosia explained to me why she changed the sitting arrangement during circle time:

> For the reasons of safety and who concentrates how. ... As a teacher-psychologist I have to control the group. ... I know that if I separate Zak, Scooby Doo will follow him and some other kids will follow them. So when I took Zak, this whole little group followed and they calmed down. So I know who I should move and where. So when I separate all the sociometric stars, I can carry out the activities I want to. (Ms Zosia, Preschool A, interview, 2007)

The teacher manipulates the sitting arrangement drawing on her knowledge of the children's personalities and friendship preferences in order to achieve the best results possible: she wants the children to be safe, calm and focused. She positions herself as an expert capable of rearranging the group in a desirable manner, as well as a leader, a person in charge who controls the children so that she can carry out her work the way she planned it. In a similar vein, Ms Agnieszka in Preschool B attempted to divide children into groups and assign them to particular tables according to their temperament so that they could complement each other and the more emotional children would not be further stimulated by their peers with hyperactivity or concentration difficulties. However, corrective and penal aspects of discipline intertwine, and children were usually asked to move to another seat when they broke regulations, which they interpreted as a form of punishment. Getting children to leave their usual places (which typically also meant moving away from their friends) was then an occasion on which the teachers' double pastor-sovereign face manifested itself: acting in the name of creating conditions for the children to improve themselves, they simultaneously punished them.

The division of children into age groups and assigning them to specific rooms, and to specific tables and chairs in these rooms, also allowed for determining at every moment where a given child was (or at least should have been). Apart from very few exceptional situations children were not allowed to

leave the room on their own without an explicit permission or order from their teachers. Distribution therefore created ideal conditions for the use of another important disciplinary technique, that of surveillance. Placing children in specific spots, each on their own chair, all of them in one room, made constant visibility possible.

## Surveillance

> A relation of surveillance, defined and regulated, is inscribed at the heart of the practice of teaching, not as an additional or adjacent part, but as a mechanism that is inherent to it and which increases its efficiency.
>
> (Foucault 1979a: 176)

Preschool is a space of a constant monitoring where children are kept under incessant surveillance and where (ideally) every step they make is recorded. Every detail of their behavior, their bodily comportment and their activities are subject to a disciplinary gaze aimed at singling out and correcting every deviant move. Surveillance has historically functioned as an important instrument in attempts to produce proper children. Tyler (1993) analyzes its role in the work of model Australian kindergartens in the 1930s., intended to stimulate developmentally appropriate behavior in children. Through the use of a number of surveillance (and other) techniques, these institutions worked to create rational, autonomous, self-regulated children, capable of taking responsibility for their actions. Surveillance, in forms strikingly resembling those that Tyler described, was as important in the Polish preschools I studied 70 years later. Apart from its role in constituting a specific child, it served as a powerful instrument of reconstructing the hierarchical order in which adults position themselves as observing and controlling children. Yet it also opened up the possibility for the children to take up a different subject position: of those who keep an eye on their peers or themselves. In this way the generational order was to some extent challenged – while simultaneously reinforcing the hierarchical order inscribed in the surveillance practices in relations among the children themselves.

Being at the core of disciplinary practice, monitoring requires an effective instrument (Foucault 1979a). Its epitome was Panopticon, a model prison building whose form made it possible to observe inmates without them being able to see those who watched them, thus producing a sense of a (potentially)

constant surveillance. As a result, the observed, not knowing exactly when they were being watched, had to continuously control themselves. While the preschools were not literally panoptical spaces, their architecture made a close observation of children possible. The classrooms were usually single open spaces with no nooks where children could hide from the teacher's gaze. The staff members also reacted to the children's attempts to create places to hide (under desks, behind pieces of furniture etc.). As a consequence, children were constantly observed. They were also frequently reminded about being observed, which forced them to control their own behavior and to ensure it conformed to the norms:

> Start eating, we're eating, now! I am watching you.
>
> And I'll be watching whom I should ask to leave the room.
>
> Don't shout! I am looking at you.

Surveillance was a disciplinary technique whose aim was to correct children's misconduct by letting them know that their mistakes were not overlooked, and that they had to make an attempt to improve their performance as it would be constantly observed, and their progress – or a lack of it – would be recorded. The following two excerpts demonstrate it clearly:

> Ms Patrycja: "I will soon ask Malec" – and she adds that we will see whether he's going to hear her, because he's already failed three times to hear what is being said to him. (Preschool B, 15.05.2007)
>
> Ms Małgorzata: "Listen, we are going to review all the songs that we have on the tape, and in the meantime there will be poems. But first of all, we will see if those who didn't know theirs yesterday, have learned anything by today." (Preschool A, 23.05.2007)

In both situations children learn that their failure to meet the expectations concerning proper conduct – to listen to what the teacher is saying and to complete one's tasks – was noticed, and now they are given another chance to work on themselves and to better themselves. This "chance," however, has a compulsory character: knowing that they will be observed and that the extent to which their actions fit what is expected will be evaluated, they have to strive to achieve the normative ideal.

The teachers position themselves here as pastor-sovereigns: they provide the children with an opportunity to improve themselves (and to demonstrate

that they have done so), while simultaneously leaving no doubt they are there watching and ready to correct them or punish them if the need be. "The chief function of the disciplinary power is to 'train'," Foucault (1979a: 170) maintains, and surveillance serves as one of the primary instruments to achieve that purpose.

Surveillance is not an exclusive domain of the teachers. For it to be effective, it has to spread from being executed by the teachers to the children who are supposed to watch each other, sometimes being explicitly invited to do so, at other times acting on their own initiative:

> Children are on the playground and about to go back to the building. Mruczek comes – he has not been on the playground for some time. Ms Agnieszka: "What were you doing for so long?" Mruczek: "I was in the bathroom." Ms Agnieszka says that he was away for half an hour. Tupcio-Chrupcio: "Because he was pooping." Another child says that he was playing. (Preschool B, 17.04.2007)

In this way, control multiplies, thus becoming in a symbolic sense entirely panoptical. No matter where the children go, there can always be someone observing them and passing on the information to the teacher. As a result, disciplinary power turns into "an 'integrated' system ... organized as a multiple, automatic and anonymous power; for although surveillance rests on individuals, its functioning is that of a network of relations" (Foucault 1979a: 176). Besides enhancing the ubiquity of power, expecting children to observe their peers also serves to construct them as individuals disciplining each other. But surveillance goes even deeper and at its final stage becomes self-surveillance, and children have to observe, assess and improve their own behavior.

As the excerpts discussed above show, surveillance plays an ambiguous role in structuring child-adult relations. On the one hand, inasmuch as the gaze belongs to the teachers, the practice reinforces the hierarchical order in which children are under control and adults monitor their behavior and discipline them when needed. But with surveillance spreading as children begin to monitor their friends and themselves, their subject position shifts from being an object of the adults' gaze to governing others and themselves. The shift is problematic since the children govern (themselves) precisely in line with what is expected from them by their teachers, so arguably they are still fairly dependent on and constrained by adults. Yet, the act of taking up this position has an important effect on children's relations with adults. First, it helps destabilize their inferior status in which they are placed by practices

based on the principle of teachers' unquestionable dominance. Second, stepping into the position of the (self-)governing child seems to be opening up the possibility for children to modify their status. It could be argued that it at least creates the opportunity for them to govern themselves differently – or attempt to negotiate their stance with the adults. The example of Harcon, who questioned altogether a teacher's invitation to observe and evaluate other children's performance, quoted in Chapter 3, is a case in point. Preschool B children, left to play on their own during the free play time, constituted themselves differently, as responsible and capable of planning their activities. In this way children appear to be more agentic, in Mayall's (2002: 21) understanding of this term as being capable of negotiating with others, "with the effect that the interaction makes a difference – to a relationship or to a decision, to the working of a set of social assumptions or constraints." It needs to be emphasized here that I am not claiming that children's (self-)governing necessarily has this effect, but that it may potentially entail it. At the same time, however, the instances of children governing their peers are difficult not to be interpreted as a reenactment of the hierarchical structure, and the practice of children governing themselves points to the extent to which norms regulating behavior have been internalized by them.

It is important to notice the ambiguity inscribed in the application of the surveillance technique in the preschool – or to allow a different reading of it. From the perspective of Foucaultian technique of power surveillance is a tool for ensuring children's control over their own actions and their adherence to predefined norms and regulations, as well as for reinforcing a hierarchical power structure in which children and adults are inscribed. Yet, read from the perspective of teachers' daily pedagogical practice with consideration given to its discursive context, surveillance can be interpreted as an inevitable response to the obligation to secure children's safety placed on the teachers. As I will demonstrate in Chapter 10, the teachers felt compelled to do everything possible to prevent accidents in their groups, largely due to the parents' – explicitly expressed or not – expectation that their children will not get hurt while at the preschool. The safety discourse was a serious burden to the teachers who at times felt as constrained by it as the children. They were also aware of some unintended consequences of surveillance for children, which posed additional dilemmas for them. Still, in a deconstructive reading of the practice, the disciplinary functions of surveillance become evident.

# Assessment, comparison and ranking

> The power of normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialities and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another.
>
> (Foucault 1979a: 184)

Disciplinary power works through the observation and judgment of the conduct of individuals, and the comparison of their behavior with that of others. Preschool children were constantly monitored, assessed and ranked, usually by their teachers, and, as a result, these practices further contributed to the construction of a hierarchical generational structure. Preschools, like other institutions gathering a large number of people, function as "observing and recording machines, machines for the registration of human differences," and disciplinary techniques they use make visible "the difference between those who did or did not, could or could not, would or would not learn the lessons of the institution" (Rose 1999: 136). As Foucault (1979a: 186) points out, the school institution is one that works on the basis of a continuous comparison of all, which makes simultaneous measurement and sanctioning possible. Indeed, in both preschools comparison and assessment were an indispensable feature of usual, everyday activities, from those of a more academic character, to play situations, to practices such as eating. All sorts of children's achievements were judged and compared to those of others:

> Ms Zosia: "Scooby Doo! But we are all singing! I will see who dances the most beautifully." (Preschool A, 04.04.2007)

> Gymnastics teacher: "Hello, my friend, have you had your lunch today? Raise your hands, please. Look at your friend, she's practicing really well." Maciek says to Kacper: "You raise your hand higher than Filemonka." (Preschool B, 07.11.2006)

In these examples children were either being assessed or threatened to be assessed, thus being pressured to perform their best. The willingness to attempt to go all out and to achieve perfection was normalized here as a feature of a proper preschooler while competitiveness became a characteristic feature of preschool reality. The second example is particularly instructive as it demonstrates that just as surveillance spread from the teachers to the children, so did assessment and comparison practices. Maciek's immediate response to the teacher's act of monitoring and classifying kids was his own judgment of

the performance of his peers. And as it was the case with surveillance, the staff sometimes explicitly invited certain children to play the role of judges:

> Ms Agnieszka: "Tomek, come to me. For the time being Tomek will stand here and then he'll tell me which group danced the most beautifully. So watch out. Then we'll organize a competition to see which group dances the best." (Preschool B, 19.03.2007)

In this case the announcement of a competition served to motivate all the kids to perform better, and even though there was no mention of any prize for those who would be ranked the highest, the sheer fact of indirectly letting the kids know that they would be watched and their performance compared to that of others was sufficient to mobilize them[41]. Moreover, it resulted in a shift of – in this case – Tomek's subject position: from a potentially monitored and assessed child to one who is given the right to control and judge others, thus stepping into the position usually reserved for teachers. Yet, the teacher's request also served to naturalize hierarchical social organization in which there were those who observed and those who were being observed, with the former being imbued with power to assess and classify.

Given the age-based distribution of children, one of the most common points of reference in comparison practices was that of younger groups or children. The developmental perspective, with its emphasis on age-related progress, was so strong in the preschools that inter-group comparisons functioned as a very powerful and effective disciplinary technique. Children were constantly threatened with downgrading. Preschool A children, when they were in the last, fourth group, could be asked at lunch if they wanted to go to the kiddies (the youngest group) to see how to eat properly. In another case, a teacher told a screaming boy that this was what children in the younger groups did, so if he wanted to scream, she would take him to their room. Similar practices could be observed in Preschool B. For instance, Ms Agnieszka responded to Krzysiu's misbehavior by saying: "You have been behaving like a kiddie lately. I think you will swap with [your younger brother]. He will come here, and you will go to the kiddies." In such situations children's behavior was deemed inappropriate for someone of their age. Their

41 As Foucault (1979a: 181) observes, "Discipline rewards simply by the play of awards, thus making it possible to attain higher ranks and places; it punishes by reversing this process. Rank in itself serves as a reward or punishment." Children did not need any additional reward apart from the awareness that they were considered the best to motivate them to improve their performance.

actions were assessed both against those (not necessarily actual) of their younger friends and against the ideal performance level they should have attained. The efficiency of this disciplinary instrument in normalizing children's behavior becomes even more evident when one realizes how regularly they were used by the children themselves, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 8.

The comparison and assessment practices could also take more elaborate forms, with kids' accomplishments or failures being described in detail and evaluated. In this excerpt the teacher carries out such an assessment following the group's Christmas play for outside-the-preschool audience:

> Ms Zosia: "Cyprian behaved really badly at the last performance, and I don't want to see such behavior again. Another person who surprised me with his good behavior and beautiful performance was Scooby Doo. Scooby Doo surprised me positively with his cultured behavior, he recited beautifully, loudly, he sang beautifully, he really behaved suitably. Go on like this. Then I was disappointed with our dear Maks; Maks, who's loud, who studies carefully, is always active, was fearful and he withdrew, he was speaking really quietly and you couldn't hear anything. Then Ronaldino behaved very well. And I need to tell you that Harcon surprised me too, because he sang beautifully, he was speaking, he didn't avoid it, and only in the beginning did he have some stage fright, but he overcame it. And also... the girls played all the angels really nicely. And Saint Joseph, very nicely. Mary had some stage fright, but it was very nice for her first performance, it was superb." (Preschool A, 10.01.2007)

The teacher attends here carefully to very small aspects of individual kids' behavior: the way they were speaking, singing, whether they were able remain calm. What is striking is a clear positioning of their actions on the scale from the positive (those the teacher was satisfied with) to the negative (what should be avoided or worked on). This fits closely with what Foucault (1979a: 180) calls a double system of gratification-sanction which results in qualifying all behaviors and achievements on the basis of two opposed values: the good and the bad. In this specific case, the gratification and sanction took the form of the teacher's expression of praise or criticism. Moreover, the fact that some children "surprised the teacher positively" reveals her construction of some of her pupils as rather incompetent and not likely to succeed, which at the same time gives an empirical basis to Foucault's claim that the concern of discipline is to maximize everyone's potential, to bring everyone to the state of perfection. Letting the children know that even those of whom a success would not be expected can actually achieve it, amounts to communicating that

this can be the case with everyone, as long as they make a sufficient effort and work on themselves.

If discipline operated within the gratification-sanction system, all the children's actions could be judged as positive or negative, and either rewarded or punished, respectively:

> Ms Patrycja: "Duch is very careful. He will get the policeman [to color]." (Preschool B, 7.11.2006)

> Ms Agnieszka: "Please, we're eating nicely. Robot Boy, are you going to be last again? We'll leave you and go outside without you if you dawdle." (Preschool B, 24.11.2006)

> The five-year-olds are still reciting the poem; the six-year-olds are talking. Ms Malgorzata: "Subaru, we'll see how you'll be saying yours. The six-year-olds behave really badly." (Preschool A, 14.05.2007)

The primary function of disciplinary power is normalization, and these examples demonstrate how, in the process of hierarchical judgment, a model preschooler (or rather one version of it) is being forged. Doing one's best while carrying out the task is desirable and deserves a reward; being a slow eater or too talkative (especially at inappropriate moments) are characteristics that should be weeded out.

Rose (1999: 133) argues that "it is around pathological children ... that conceptions of normality have taken shape. ... expert notions of normality are extrapolated from our attention to those children who worry the courts, teachers, and parents." Harcon's case (discussed in Chapter 3) is the most instructive: he functioned as a negative point of reference for constructing a normative ideal of a proper, "non-pathological" preschooler. However, the mechanism underlying the last two short exchanges above, while perhaps not as striking as in Harcon's case, remains the same: to penalize what is undesirable and, as a consequence of operating within the double gratification-sanction system, to establish what is to be attained. As Rose (*ibid.*) underscores, besides indicating what is desirable, normality is also "an injunction as to a goal to be achieved." By punishing children who were too loud, too active, who ate too slowly or played with their food, the teachers simultaneously were forging a normative ideal for their pupils to reach.

## The gender dimension of surveillance and ranking

Some of the examples discussed above already indicated a tendency for the surveillance and ranking techniques to move from the teachers to the kids as those responsible for employing them. In fact the staff themselves invited children to control and evaluate each other, which allowed for the development of a specific subject position to be taken by some kids: of "disciplinary agents," who monitored and disciplined their peers. In both preschools this transfer of surveillance power from the teachers to the children frequently had a gender dimension: the girls were encouraged to observe and evaluate the boys, and vice versa. This practice, naturalizing gender difference by drawing on the assumption of girls' and boys' willingness to compete with each other and/or to show off in front of each other, served as a means for stimulating the kids' involvement in an activity and pushing them into carrying out their task as best as they could. The following excerpts are an illustration of two different modes in which such gendered surveillance could be executed: first with girls and boys as individuals competing in front of the opposite gender group; second with girls and boys as groups competing against each other.

> Ms Zosia: "And now the girls sing with me. The boys are watching which of them sings the nicest. And then the boys. We'll see which boy sings the nicest. He will get the biggest applause. ... So, which girl was singing most nicely?" A couple of boys say: "Ania." Ms Zosia: "OK, please, give Ania and Piękna a round of applause, because they were both singing equally nice. And the girls over there still can't sing." (Preschool A, 22.06.2007)

> Children finish singing, and the principal says: "Why so poorly?" Ms Agnieszka suggests that they could divide themselves into girls and boys. The principal says that first only the girls will sing, then the boys; there are more boys, but we'll see who will sing better. Ms Agnieszka tells the kids to rearrange themselves so that the boys are sitting on one side, and the girls on the other. The principal asks the boys to watch how the girls are singing. When the girls are done singing, she says that now the boys are singing, and the girls are watching. They finish; the principal says that it was great, and – more quietly and somewhat jokingly – she adds that maybe they will just go on singing as separate groups. (Preschool B, 17.05.2007)

Such acts of classification of the children as separate groups of girls and boys, and of positioning them as opposed, competing parties, was one of the most powerful tools of reinforcing the principle of gender differentiation. Particularly important is the impact they had on establishing the normative ideal of a model preschooler as someone who strives to perform as well as

they can, which, as the first example indicates, could imply competing with others, rather than collaborating with them in the attempt to attain certain goals.

## Production of docile bodies

> A 'political anatomy', which was also a 'mechanics of power', was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies.
>
> (Foucault 1979a: 138)

Disciplinary power operates on the level of the body, with the aim of using, transforming and improving it. Preschool children's docile bodies had to properly move (walking, rather than running, with a straight back, not shambling) or sit (with both feet on the floor, on a chair rather than on a table, and if on the floor then cross-legged, in a specific area – e.g. a "magic stripe," i.e., a line pattern at the edge of the carpet in Preschool B – and without fidgeting much). Thus, the way the children walked, sat and stood was closely observed and, if necessary, corrected:

> Children line up, but the teacher tells them to return to the middle of the room and line up again. It seems they were not standing properly. (Preschool B, 7.11.2006)

> Ms Agnieszka: "Look at how you are sitting, all hunching over. Sit upright, nicely." (Preschool B, 29.10.2006)

But the children's use of their body was also scrutinized in order to ensure that it was sufficiently dignified, composed and tamed. The body was not an entity that could be used freely as an instrument of expressing emotions; quite the opposite, the teachers' disciplinary gaze worked to train the kids to constrain their bodies and conform them to the rules of proper conduct. Significantly, children could be scolded for spilling their drinks, dropping bits of their food on the floor or falling from the jungle gym – in each case for not being sufficiently attentive and careful, thus allowing their bodies to get out of control. The following examples illustrate such an attitude toward the body:

> Scooby Doo is sitting on a table and waving his legs. The aide: "Scooby Doo, get off the table." He gets off, knees on a chair, but soon after sits on the table again. The aide reprimands him. Later on he taps a bottle against his leg, and the aide reprimands him for this too. (Preschool A, 25.06.2007)

> Kids are to get ready for a rehearsal; they are in the corridor, but instead of lining up, they are climbing up a mattress and moving it. The teacher comes in, sees it and shouts at them: "And what do you think you are doing?! What are you doing, man? I told you, stand still. Go stand still and get ready for your part." (Preschool B, 28.03.2007)

In the first excerpt, Scooby Doo did not do anything that would contravene any specific, officially announced, rule. Yet, it went against a normative understanding of both the proper use of one's body and the purpose of specific pieces of equipment. Unconventional behavior, even if it is entirely harmless, is recorded, condemned and corrected. In the second example the kids used their bodies to rebel by engaging in a forbidden activity (children were not allowed to play on the mattresses on their own) they enjoyed immensely while rarely being given a chance to take up, but also by practically refusing to follow the teacher's plan. Although it was their use of their bodies – not serene, quiet and unagitated enough – that became the direct object of the teacher's act of surveillance and correction, it could be argued that the body here was only a symbol, or an external layer, of what was indeed intended to be punished. Foucault (1979a) argues that disciplinary power, through all the techniques that operate on the body, produces an individual's "soul," turns an individual into a specific subject. Through the control of children's use of their bodies, the teachers constructed children as composed, self-controlled and constrained.

A preschooler's docile body had to display good manners. Meal time was the primary moment when children were observed to ensure that they behaved appropriately. First of all, they were supposed to eat in silence and were frequently reprimanded for talking during their meals. When questioned, a Preschool B teacher claimed that the point was not for the children not to say a single word, but to prevent them from "going crazy," while that from Preschool A, being rather inconsistent as to whether kids actually could or could not talk, pointed to the danger of choking when talking while eating. Still, irrespective of the teachers' declarations, incidents of forbidding the children to speak were multiple. Even more impermissible were cases of children using their bodies in an entirely playful manner:

> Kids are having their lunch. One has got the hiccups, another tries to imitate him, some make some other sounds. Subaru takes a mouthful of drink and is gurgling; some of the liquid flows out of his mouth. Zak notices this and tells him about it. A few kids laugh. At some point Ms Małgorzata approaches Zak and tells him to stand next to his chair.
> Ms Małgorzata: "Please stand up here. You'll be standing up. Upright!" (Preschool A, 12.05.2006)

> Kacper takes a slice of bread and puts it on his head, pretending to be a king. Paulina is doing the same, and Emil says laughingly that now they have a king and a queen. The aide notices the slice of bread on Paulina's head and reprimands her. (Preschool B, 29.05.2005)

Here again the kids' bodies are controlled in order to ensure that they are used in line with existing social norms. While being an instrument of turning children into proper preschoolers and, as a consequence, proper members of the society at large, the body is also a surface on which a model of a mature, serious and composed – but also constrained and hampered – child is produced, a child who is effectively prevented from using his or her imagination or creativity, from moving beyond the limits of what is considered normal. Moreover, in these situations, control over the body helps to produce the meaning of different spaces. Spaces in which some forms of the "unauthorized" use of the body would be allowed are distinguished from those where they are not (e.g. making various sounds was generally acceptable on the playground, but not inside the preschool building). This further reinforces the normative ideal of a mature, reasonable child who is capable of adjusting their behavior to a given situation. A reverse side of this practice is positioning those who have not mastered this competence as deficient and in need of correction. Singling out children who fail to exhibit good manners has precisely this function.

In the disciplinary production of docile bodies the only ceremony that matters is that of exercise, as Foucault observes (1979: 137). Preschool A developed a specific practice of training the bodies that can be most precisely labeled as ceremonial of exercise:

> A teacher: "And please, hands up, one, two. Right hand up. Up and down. Up and down. Right hand, you don't know which is your right hand. Now. Up and down. Quiet. I don't know why Dorota is not doing this at all. She's not listening to me. Up and down. One hand, right, up and down. One hand, Maks. Which hand? Right hand. This is your right hand. Scooby Doo is not listening to me. Up and down. And now please put your hands on your knees,

> Scooby Doo, and we'll see who is sitting the nicest." (Preschool A, 18.05.2006)

In this exercise everyone was to perform a given sequence at the same pace and without making any mistakes or attempting to cheat. It could take various forms: sometimes the children were asked to walk in a circle making specific movements or squat down and get up rhythmically. According to the teachers, the aim of such a practice was to help the children calm down. It was usually administered when the children "misbehaved": when they were deemed too loud or too dynamic (e.g. they were running in the classroom), were talking too much, or when they got into a fight. It could also take place – as in the example quoted above – before educational activities with the purpose of making children focus and ready to study. Thus, from the teachers' perspective, there could have been good pedagogical reasons for resorting to such practices. Yet, in the Foucaultian framework of the analytics of power they constituted the perfect disciplinary punishment. The direct training of the body became a means of improving the kids' "souls": besides normalizing the ability to keep quiet and composed as a characteristic of a proper preschooler by punishing (hyper)activeness, it was meant to enable the children to participate in the preschool life in a proper manner by getting them to vent their emotions and to focus. Bodily self-discipline, achieved through the monotonous repetition of certain movements, was only a means of mastering complete self-discipline. Having practiced exerting control over their bodies in the course of teacher-directed physical exercise, the children were expected to maintain similar control over the way in which they conducted themselves in all other aspects.

## Monitoring children's appearance

The kids' bodies were monitored to ensure not only that they moved and behaved in the correct manner, but also that they looked appropriately. Hence the control over the children's appearance.

First, control over the kids' clothing and hairstyles played a significant role in constructing preschoolers as distinct groups of girls and boys:

> A conversation about the upcoming performance for Mother's and Father's Day. Ms Agnieszka tells the kids how they are to dress: elegantly, boys in white shirts, clean pants and ties; girls in dresses or skirts. Girls with long hair are to bring hairbrushes so that their hair could be combed. (Preschool B, 17.05.2005)

Similar situations happened consistently before all kinds of official events, be it for the preschool kids themselves (e.g. Christmas or Easter dinners) or for external guests (Mother's/Father's/Grandparents' Day, Graduation or end-of-the-year celebrations and so on). Staff at both preschools insisted that girls wear skirts or dresses, and boys put on their bow ties, which serves to reinforce the construction of elegant, "public" women and men as distinct categories. The efficiency of this kind of control and correction inscribed in it, finds its best illustration in the fact that once garbed as such, the kids would usually position themselves as separate groups, teasing each other, and with girls ready to pretend to be princesses or ladies ("In this dress I really feel like a princess," Ania responded to Niko who greeted her "Hello, princess" when she put on a long dress before one of the performances).

Yet, all aspects of the kids' appearance were subject to the teachers' control: from their faces and hands that had to be always washed clean, to their hair that was supposed to be neat, and pants properly pulled up:

> Ms Agnieszka reprimands one of the girls: "Why did you take all your hair ties off? What do you look like now?" (Preschool B, 25.06.2007)

> A couple of kids have dirty hands and, while they are on the playground, Ms Zosia admonishes them: "Dirty face, dirty hands. You are all dirty. Go and wash yourself. You are dirty. Dirty hands, haven't been washed." Later on, when back inside the preschool, Harcon still has some sand on his nose. Weronika, in a very dramatic voice, says: "Please, look, he's so dirty!" (Preschool A, 18.05.2006)

The second example demonstrates control becomes widespread and omnipresent: now it is not only the teachers who monitor the kids' behavior and appearance; it is also children themselves who monitor each other.

Controlling their appearance also meant pointing to those elements of children's clothing that were deemed inappropriate in the preschool. This both strengthened the division of space into separate sections that should not be confused, and reinforced the normative ideal of the preschooler as someone who is aware of the specificity of those distinct spaces and can behave accordingly in each of them:

> Kasia must have fallen down; she's got a scab on her knee and a hole in her tights. She's wearing white, thin tights. Ms Zosia: "Such tights are only to wear to church, not to a preschool." (Preschool A, 19.04.2005)

As was the case with other disciplinary practices, the functions of monitoring children's appearance were manifold. Not only did it work to produce girls and boys – the gender distinction being highly relevant here – who were supposed to be able to control their own looks, but it also reinforced the child-adult hierarchy that structured everyday preschool life. As some of the extracts show, the adults had the right to determine – sometimes in an entirely arbitrary manner – what the children should wear. Furthermore, while doing so they also constructed the preschool as a place organized according to certain rules, which the last quotes demonstrate.

However, this was not to only pattern possible. Attention paid to children's appearance could play yet a different role as an instrument of constituting a responsible, self-governing child. In an incident that took place in Preschool B, Ms Agnieszka explained to the children who were about to go to the playground how to dress. The kids who wore long-sleeve shirts were supposed to stay as they were, while those who had short-sleeve shirts on were asked to put on another piece of clothing. While in the cloakroom the children started telling her what they were wearing and asked whether they had to put on something else. She said that they were big kids, already 6 years old, and they could decide on their own what to wear. The reliance on the developmental discourse is obvious here. What is important, however, is the fact that a reference to children's appearance was used here to produce a rather different construction of the child and child-adult relations.

## Monitoring children's physiology and physiological needs

The practice of producing docile bodies could go as far as to the level of children's bodily functioning and basic physiological needs. One example is the use of the toilet:

> The teacher tells the kids to walk around the carpet so that they calm down. Harry is walking with a frowning face, hands covering his crotch area. It crosses my mind that someone might have kicked or hit him. I ask him what happened; he says that he wants to pee, but the teacher wouldn't let him go. (Preschool A, 29.11.2006)

Control over the kids' physiology happened on a regular basis – although occurrences such as in the excerpt above were fairly rare. Nonetheless, in both preschools children had to ask for permission to go to the bathroom – and even though in most cases they would receive it, the need to ask entailed the possibility of being refused. In a similar vein, they would be told when to use

the bathroom: before nap time, various events (performances, concerts etc.) or certain classes. They would often do it as a group, assisted by the teacher. Such regulations concerning the use of the bathroom meant that the children had to develop quite a degree of self-control over their physiology, but also that they sometimes suffered physically as a result of not being able to satisfy their basic needs.

However, regulating the children's use of the toilet could play a different role than merely controlling their physiology. Given the constant surveillance the children were subject to, they continuously sought places where they could legitimately stay away from the teachers' sight. The bathroom was one of these places and, as a result, children would sometimes go there for the purpose of being alone or with their friends, unseen by the teachers. Obviously, the teachers were aware of the children's readiness to use the bathroom illegitimately so, for instance, they often insisted on children going there one by one. It is therefore difficult to judge whether forbidding children to go to the bathroom meant that the teachers prevented them from satisfying their physiological need or from escaping the adults' gaze. In either case, however, they ignored the children's needs, be it to use the toilet or to be alone. Moreover, it also needs to be remembered that regulations pertaining to the bathroom use were embedded in a broader framework of the preschool functioning and teachers' obligations. Due to the emphasis on child protection and safety, the teachers were required to keep an eye on children at all times. Children's independent use of the toilet entailed their leaving the room and thus being unattended, which, from the perspective of what was required from the teachers, was unacceptable. As a result, making the children go to the bathroom together, as a group accompanied by the teacher, appeared to be the most appropriate solution in terms of the teachers' fulfillment of their duties. This solution, however, stood in a direct opposition to the children's needs, which points to the children's antagonistic structural position exemplified by the fact that their interests clash with those of adults (Wyness 2006: 28). The adults power to ignore children's needs and follow their own agenda (although it might entail conflicts and tension) points directly to the children's inferior position in the preschool social structure.

Disregarding children's needs or not taking them seriously occurred in other contexts as well. In Preschool A it was immediately visible during meals when staff members often openly rejected the children's right to refuse to eat their meal:

Niko: "I won't eat it, I will eat only the middle part. I don't like buns."

> Ms Zosia: "You have to eat it all or you won't leave the table. Whether you like it or not." (Preschool A, 31.10.2006)

Such comments served as a means whereby to inform the children that their tastes, preferences or wishes – or indeed the fact whether they were hungry and felt like eating at all or not – were irrelevant. This was reinforced by the organization of meals: at specific times, with a set menu determined by a designated staff member, and children's choice limited to (sometimes) having the right not to eat what they disliked – but never to choose what to eat[42].

One of the most frequently ignored needs was free access to drinking water[43]. Quite a problem in both institutions, it was a particularly striking issue in Preschool A, where children often complained about being thirsty. Situations such as the following were commonplace:

> Someone says that Ronaldino wants a drink. Then Subaru says that he wants some too, and both him and Maks pass their cups to the teacher who pours in some drink which they drink fast and shout again: "We want a drink! We want a drink!" The teacher responds: "No, you've had some." They start shouting rhythmically: "Drink, drink, drink!" The teacher says: "You've had it, there is no more." (Preschool A, 23.10.2006)

The fact that children were prevented from freely satisfying such a basic need is a clear indication of their low status in the institution. In part this was a structural issue and staff members attributed the restricted access to drinks to financial constraints, and even though they agreed that children should be able to get as much to drink as they needed, they also claimed that this would require raising the fee paid by parents (which, as one of the teachers stated,

42 Among all the teachers I talked to only one – Ms Agnieszka in Preschool B – was openly in favor of the idea of buffet-style meals that would give children some choice as to what to eat. Others speculated that by having a choice, kids would end up eating only jam sandwiches or spaghetti instead of healthy, square meals, or that they would all like to eat the same dish making such a solution impractical.

43 In none of the preschools was the tap water potable, so children had to be provided with bottled water or other drinks. They were served drinks with meals, but this was insufficient. Ensuring children's free access to drinks at all time would have required securing additional financial resources, which, given the preschools' rather tight budgets, was fairly difficult. Preschool B managed to finance water containers, but had problems finding resources for disposable cups, which the teachers considered necessary for sanitary reasons. In Preschool A, where buying bottled water was not a financially viable option, teachers encouraged parents to provide children with additional drinks. This, however, meant that children whose parents failed to do so were still thirsty.

could make it unaffordable for some parents). On a broader plane, the inability of the preschools to ensure that children have access to water points to the systemic disregard for childcare institutions that are not provided with sufficient resources.

Still, economic constraints were only one aspect of the issue. During meals children were served drinks by the staff and neither of the institutions considered it appropriate to let the children pour in their own drinks (even though all of them were capable of easily doing it). In this way the control over satisfying children's needs served as a powerful instrument of reinforcing the hierarchical relations.

Control of behavior, body, appearance and activities are all elements of what Foucault (1979a: 177) calls a small penal mechanism and which he conceives as an integral part of all disciplinary systems. Typical of its functioning is the "micro-penalty" of the smallest units of one's life. As Foucault underlines, the point is to make the minutest details of behavior subject to normalized sanction – and all transgressions, all moves away from the rule, all forms of deviance can be singled out and penalized (*ibid.*: 178). In the process, the norm is being established. This was also the function of surveillance and control in the preschool: by focusing on acts deemed inappropriate, a model preschooler was produced: one who is in control of themselves, including their body, emotions, passions or desires; one who knows the boundaries (between different spheres or orders) and limits and is capable of refraining from crossing them; but also one who controls and, when necessary, punishes others. In a word, a mature, responsible, serious and subordinated preschooler.

## Coercion

A final instrument used by the teachers to establish their dominant position in the preschool hierarchical order was coercion and violence. Strictly speaking, in the Foucaultian framework it should not be categorized as a technique of power. As Foucault points out, "where the determining factors saturate the whole there is no relationship of power; slavery is not a power relationship when man is in chains" (Foucault 1982: 221). Being physically forced to act in a specific way without having the possibility to resist and act differently, the children could not be considered, in Foucault's terminology, free. The use of coercion and violence therefore served to construct children as different

subjects than the techniques already discussed. It also differentiated clearly between the preschools, being frequently used in Preschool A and almost entirely absent from Preschool B. Coercion pertained to a whole range of activities, from making children take a nap in the first years of preschool, to sitting in a specific place, to – where the practice reached its peak – eating, as demonstrated in the following examples:

> Ania does not eat. Ms Małgorzata approaches her and tries to feed her. Ania clenches her mouth, shrinks, shakes her head. The teacher first gives her some pasta; Ania does not open her mouth; then some meat – she does the same. After a while Ms Małgorzata gives up. Later on I see Ania get up and squat behind her chair. Ms Małgorzata tells her to get up, sit at the table and eat. Ania sits on the chair, but she does not eat, and only from time to time plays with her food. (Preschool A, 09.03.2006)

> Every once in a while Ms Małgorzata stands next to a child and tells him or her to eat. Kasia and Agata are crying. The teacher stands next to them and tells them to eat, saying: "Now, or I'll feed you." (Preschool A, 11.04.2005)

Such acts served as one of the most powerful instruments of establishing children's inferior status. Children comprehended that adults were in a position to make them (or at least to legitimately try to make them) do whatever they considered appropriate – up to the point of bringing children to tears. As the first extract shows, children were able to resist successfully such attempts to break their will, but Ania's body language – her shrinking and hiding quietly behind a chair – demonstrates how much effort this required. Forcing children to behave in a certain manner worked to establish adults not simply as those at the top of the power hierarchy, but also as those who knew what children needed and what was good for them. In their discourse, force feeding, for instance, was justified as a means of getting children to eat enough not to be hungry when they stayed long hours in the preschool, to obtain their daily intake of nutrients, and, ultimately, to ensure that they remain healthy.

Yet the children were forced to undertake all sorts of actions, including participating in teacher-directed, planned activities. An excerpt from a religion lesson in Preschool A is a particularly good illustration:

> Children are sitting in a circle and are supposed to sing a song. One boy does not want to and moves to the side. The religion teacher tries to drag him to the group saying: "We're not drawing now, come here." He starts crying. She finally manages to move him closer to other kids; he still stands behind them and she keeps on pulling him to the circle. (Preschool A, 10.11.2004)

Not only did the teacher inform the child (a newcomer to the group) about the need to participate in an all-group activity, but also used physical force to make him join other kids. Doing so, she reinforced the child's inferior status as one whose interests are irrelevant and who can be forced to do whatever an adult has planned for them to do, while positioning herself as dominant. Simultaneously, she constructed the preschool as a site structured by adults and in which the children's own choice is limited.

In its most extreme form, coercion turned into physical violence. Condemned by the principals and forbidden in the light of legal regulations, it was not absent from preschool reality. It was quite widespread in Preschool A, but also noticeable – although rather occasionally and only in relation to specific kids – in Preschool B. It served as one of the most powerful instruments of establishing the hierarchical generational order.

Given the asymmetry in physical strength between children and adults, all instances of dragging, shaking, forcefully moving, immobilizing or spanking pointed to their unequal status. Even though some children responded to acts of teachers' violence by trying to fight back (and in Preschool A, occasionally hitting adults as a response to their exhibiting power in other ways, such as humiliating children or giving them orders they particularly disliked), such reactions were immediately condemned as unacceptable and stopped with an even intensified violence. Most children, however, were aware of the social norm forbidding violence toward adults and refrained from attacking their teachers. Needless to say, their small size and lack of physical strength would prevent them from returning the adults' acts. In this way, the inferior position of children in relation to adults was reinforced in a double manner, both on a biological and a symbolic plane. This was further emphasized by the fact that acts of physical violence served as a means of communicating to the children that adults had the right to hurt them, to cause their pain and suffering (both physical and emotional); that their feelings were irrelevant and could be ignored.

The use of violence was particularly striking in the case of children considered disobedient. While in Preschool A Harcon was such a child, in Preschool B Robert was his counterpart. A member of the group during one year only, he was presented to me by a teacher as misbehaved, disruptive, stirring up conflicts and ruining the group dynamics. Disliked by other children – because, as I was told by Emil, "he beats up everyone and throws cars around, and leaves the table first and goes to the room and makes a mess, and everyone has to clean up after him" – he was frequently attacked

physically by them or excluded from their play. While teachers went to considerable lengths to counter the children's acts of what they perceived as mistreating Robert, they could also be seen being more violent toward him than toward other preschoolers:

> Ms Agnieszka tells Robert to move next to her. He does not want to and lies on the floor on his back. The teacher counts: one-two-three; he does not get up. She approaches him, lifts him up and drags him by his hand to her place. She seats him on the floor next to her chair and holds his shoulder. He kneels up every once in a while to see the book the teacher is now reading to the kids, and she pushes him down. From time to time he says that it hurts. (Preschool B, 08.02.2006)

These situations indicate that resorting to physical violence against children could be interpreted as a sign of the teachers' failure as those in a position of power, or at least symptomatic of the appearance of a serious threat to that position[44]. Disobedient, "improper" preschoolers who openly rebelled and refused to abide by the staff's commands threatened the existing hierarchical order to the greatest extent. Unable to establish their dominant position by more legitimate means, the teachers had to turn to more violent ways of ensuring that children obeyed. From this perspective, using physical violence can be perceived not as a means of punishment, but of reinforcing a hierarchical generational order in which children were expected to show deference to adults. Results of recent research on the attitudes toward corporal punishment carried out in seven Eastern European countries (including Poland), with primary school teachers from capital cities as one of the respondent groups, seem to confirm such an interpretation (Sajkowska 2005). As many as 15.2 percent of Polish teacher respondents stated that spanking children is acceptable when they do not listen to their parents, and 14.6 percent – when they do not demonstrate respect for them. Children's failure to confirm their inferior status was presented as a justification for inflicting physical violence on them. Symptomatically, parents of the children in the groups I studied appeared to share this view. In Preschool A 12 out of 18, and in Preschool B 17 out of 22 parents agreed that it was acceptable to

44 According to a study on attitudes toward corporal punishment, 62.7 percent of Polish primary school teachers participating in it claimed that imposing corporal punishment on children indicates that parents are not good caretakers/tutors (Sajkowska 2005). The illegitimate use of physical violence against children in preschools can supposedly be also perceived as an indication of the teachers' inability to effectively employ other means of interacting with children.

hold a child's hand and make them move if they do not want to do so voluntarily, and 9 out of 18 and 18 out of 22 respectively found it acceptable to shout at a child. Importantly, they pointed to the kids' disobedience, not listening to their parents or not responding to their commands as a justification for their acts. Moreover, several parents who also accepted spanking a child – either lightly (8 out of 18 in Preschool A and 8 out of 22 in Preschool B) or strongly (2 out of 18 in Preschool A and 4 out of 22 in Preschool B) – gave similar reasons: not responding to repeated requests, being disobedient, going into a sulk, pretending they do not hear what is being said to them[45]. This indicates that physical violence could function as a means of reaffirming and restoring the hierarchical order.

Shouting at children played a similar role. Virtually non-existent in Preschool B[46], it was recognized as a problem in Preschool A – by the principals, the children and, sometimes, the teachers themselves. Children were shouted at very often – for not moving where the adults wanted them to move, or moving where they were not supposed to go, for not moving fast enough, for not responding to an adult's command, for doing anything considered inappropriate, or – in many children's view – for no reason[47]. Virtually all the children I talked to stated that they did not like the fact that the staff members shouted at them and that this made them feel bad. In a particularly telling case, a child who was about to leave the preschool revealed to me that he did not want to attend it any longer because of Ms Zosia who shouted at the children, even though he would still like to spend more time with his best friends from the preschool. Importantly, children experienced shouting as a form of violence, as Alladynka's description of what she felt like when she was shouted at shows: "I feel sad. As if someone was beating me and I would get sad." As in the case of physical violence, children were fully

45 Parents' opinions are derived from a questionnaire I administered among them by the end of the research project.

46 The Preschool B principal, when asked about teachers' behaviors she found unacceptable, immediately replied "aggression and shouting" and this was to a large extent a whole-preschool policy. The teachers very rarely would raise their voice while interacting with children.

47 Based on my observations, the children often seemed to be correct in claiming that the teachers shouted at them without any specific reason. What became clear to me was that the Preschool A staff often did it as a result of stress, frustration or fatigue they experienced, which made them unable to keep their composure and prompted their aggressive reactions toward the children's slightest misbehavior. This had quite an opposite effect, making children even more irritated, angry and ready to reject the teachers' instructions.

aware of the fact that shouting was a behavior they were not allowed to exhibit toward adults, and as a result it functioned as another vivid illustration of their inferior status.

The difference in the use of coercion- and violence-based instruments in each of the preschools requires some attention. First, it could result from the teachers' perception of proper teaching. For instance, Ms Zosia from Preschool A reflected in the following way on the role of voice in child-adult interactions:

> I should speak more quietly to children. I should – this was my mistake – I should speak more quietly to children, because children are very sensitive to the teacher's voice. They made me realize that, you know? Because I wasn't even aware of it. I had this emotional approach, because it seemed to me – this is what I was taught – that I should speak loudly to children. These are old, bad habits. The way they teach them nowadays, they make them aware that a teacher has to speak quietly, calmly, and then a child experiences this quietness and security... So I have promised myself that I would adopt it, because this is a very wise rule, but nobody has made me realize that I should speak quietly and calmly to children. (Ms Zosia, Preschool A, interview, 26.06.2007)

The reference to the "old, bad habits" is significant. The Preschool A teachers were older than those in Preschool B and more devoted to "old methods" based on the principle of the teacher's authority and a strictly top-down approach, in line with what Walkerdine (1984: 168) identifies as "class teaching." Ms Zosia's comment sheds light on a very important aspect of the process of construction of the hierarchical generational structure and, implied in it, the positioning of children as inferior. It was not an outcome of the teachers' intentional decision and they did not make a conscious choice of instruments whereby to implement such structures. Limited and constrained by discourses and practices related to child-adult interactions available to them, they acted in ways they considered appropriate, beneficial to children, or the only possible alternative. Yet, the subject positions the teachers took in the process, and those in which children were placed or which they chose to take, effectively led to reinforcing hierarchical power structures in which children were (and felt) inferior. I will take up this issue again in Chapter 10.

Simultaneously, some of the teachers' actions were at least partly an outcome of the teachers' conscious decisions based on their understanding of proper interpersonal relations. Ms Agnieszka, Preschool B teacher, stated:

> I can't stand it when someone forces a child to do something, and the child does not want to. This I don't like. I don't like being forced to do anything, and I don't like forcing others either. You don't want to, that's fine. It's up to you. It's your free will. I can only ask you, I can suggest, invite, but not force. (Ms Agnieszka, Preschool B, interview, 27.05.2005)

Although the exact extent to which this ideal was put into practice differed depending on the specific teacher, coercion as such was rather marginal in Preschool B. Instead, I observed several instances of teachers who responded to children who did not want to participate in a given activity or to eat something by saying that they did not have to. This, however, can as well mean that other, more subtle and less readily visible means of making children do what the adults wanted them to do were put in operation. The regime of truth that regulated life in the preschool made it clear that it was the adults who had the power and right to tell the children what to do, and in many cases a teacher's simple command was sufficient to make children do what they were asked to do without the need to resort to more violent means. The understanding of what a proper preschooler should act like appeared to be part of a common knowledge, and this included not only the obedience principle, but also the commitment to learning and acquiring skills. It could be argued then, that Preschool B children competently took up the subject position of a proper preschooler and governed themselves in line with what was expected from them, thus rendering direct coercion unnecessary. Even though Ms Agnieszka would not force children to eat but only tell them to do so, most of them would still eat their meals properly. She might have not used powerful, violent means to make them work in their books or practice a song or a dance – and yet they would all do it without much resistance. And although they were not, in principle, forced to do anything, nevertheless the children told me that they did not like the fact that, in Cornelia's words, "teachers ruled" or, as Filemonka put it, "Ms Agnieszka constantly gives orders. This and that, and that, and that. Do this, don't do this, don't do that." Thus a lack of immediately visible acts of forcing children to undertake certain actions did not mean that they did not feel coerced into behaving in a way the teachers expected them to do. Quite the contrary – they were still fully aware of their own limited scope of decision and choice. As Foucault (1982: 220) claims, "what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future." He refers to that "structur[ing

of] the possible field of action of others" as governing (*ibid.*: 221). Preschool B teachers did not need to force children to do what they wanted them to do. Instead, they discursively constructed a framework of action, an element of which was a normalized ideal of a preschool child's proper conduct, that effectively delimited children's possible actions. Still, in the Foucaultian perspective a defining feature of a power relationship is that it is exercised over free subjects, i.e., those who have the possibility of behaving in a number of ways, including resisting the attempt to govern their actions. Power relationships operating in Preschool B therefore opened up more possibilities for children's actions than coercion-based relationships in Preschool A.

All the disciplinary practices based on the teachers' coercion had one feature in common: they involved behavior considered illegitimate if directed toward adults. Most likely none of the professionals who shouted at children, dragged or spanked them, humiliated them or forced them to undertake certain actions would venture to behave similarly in relation to another adult, aware that this would be perceived as disrespectful and in violation of that person's dignity. Yet, even though they might have also conceived of such behavior as not entirely appropriate in relation to children, they still consistently treated children in such a way. This indicates the extent to which children and adults function socially as distinct groups whose members can be treated in a radically differentiated manner. It also speaks volumes for the children's status as a minority social group, characterized by the lack of power and means to decide on their lives as well as the neglect and rejection of their rights (Mayall 2002: 20).

## Summary

The objective of this chapter was to demonstrate how techniques of disciplinary power operated in the preschools as means of positioning children as specific subjects and establishing a hierarchical generational order. By no means are these techniques typical of Polish preschools. Tyler (1993) discovered that some of them structured Australian kindergartens in the 1930s., and Gore (1998) pointed to their existence in a number of different educational settings by the end of the twentieth century. This is not surprising. Educational institutions are, like other social institutions, permeated with relations of power and discipline inevitably operates there.

Techniques such as distribution, surveillance, assessment, ranking, monitoring of children's bodily behavior and appearance worked to construct the model of a proper, "normal" preschooler: in control of oneself, constrained, obedient and ready to follow regulations. One could suggest that such a construction of a child has concrete pedagogical consequences as it may prevent children from questioning the world around them, challenging solutions offered and inventing alternatives. Importantly, while many of the techniques were visible in both preschools, some were rather typical of one of them. In particular, the use of physical violence and coercion dominated in Preschool A. I suggested that their relative absence from Preschool B may indicate the success of other disciplinary techniques that turned children into self-governing subjects.

The disciplinary power played a double role. Not only did it work to constitute children as specific subjects, but it also structured child-adult relations. Picking up on Mayall's (2002) notion of children as a minority status group, I argued that children in preschools functioned as a subordinate group whose opinions and needs could be disregarded. This is evident especially in the context of their limited power to have their basic needs satisfied as well as of the adults' use of violence toward them. Mayall (*ibid.*) argues that the minority status of children is revealed not only by their dependency on and subordination to adults, which I pointed to in this chapter, but also by the fact that adults shape the main sites of childhood. This point will be developed in more detail in the next chapter.

# 7. Structuring everyday preschool life and child-adult relations

> The teacher has to say it like this: You can play. And then we play. And when the teacher says: Sit down, we sit down. And when we are to sit at the table, the teacher says: Sit at the table. And when we are going to have our soup, the teacher says: Soon we will have the soup. Sit down on the carpet. And when the soup arrives, the teacher says: Sit down at the table and eat. And when Anita was eating too slowly, I saw the teacher feed her. (Piękna, Preschool A)

In the previous chapters I discussed some of the disciplinary technologies that operated in the preschools to construct a normalized model of the preschooler and a hierarchical generational order in which adults positioned themselves as dominant and children had to subordinate. In this chapter I develop the theme of the construction of the generational structure. I do it through the analysis of the teachers' role in devising rules and norms, and their control over children's activities, time and space. Mayall (2002: 20) claims that the power that adults have in organizing the main sites of childhood, i.e., the school and the home, and in defining children's experiences in them, reveals children's minority status. As a result, structuring everyday life and constructing the preschool child are inextricably intertwined.

Structuring and controlling preschool reality by the adults was easily noticeable in both institutions. However, just as in each of the preschools a somewhat different model of the preschooler was constructed (as I demonstrated in Chapter 4), the roles that children and adults played in establishing the order of everyday life in each place also differed in some aspects. The objective of this chapter is to discuss the practices whereby the preschool reality was structured in each institution. I analyze practices that were common to both places, but I also point to differences in the way in which these practices were implemented. Generally speaking, in both preschools the adults (be it the specific teachers who worked with the groups, the principals, or public officials or experts) determined the overall framework that organized everyday life. What distinguished one place from the other was the degree of children's power to make decisions on some aspects of their

lives in the preschool within the predefined framework. While Preschool A children were expected to merely follow their teachers' instructions most of the time, those in Preschool B were able to plan parts of their day on their own. I suggest that this difference could be possibly related to the use of distinct pedagogical approaches: visible vs. invisible (Bernstein 2003). While visible pedagogy dominated in both preschools, Preschool B seemed moving toward the invisible pedagogy, and this shift may have accounted for some crucial differences in practices observable in the two institutions.

## Development and implementation of rules

> Króliczek: It's not allowed to play in the preschool; one can only shout on the playground so that they aren't shouting in the preschool.
> KG: And why can't you shout in the preschool?
> Króliczek: Because we can't.
> KG: Did the teacher just say that it's not allowed, or is there any reason for it?
> Króliczek: The reason is that it is not allowed, the teacher simply said that these are the rules, and if someone barks they will be punished, and if someone shouts they will be punished.
> KG: Who came up with such rules?
> Króliczek: Ms Agnieszka.
> KG: On her own or with you?
> Króliczek: On her own. (Preschool B, 17.04.2007)

The preschools in my research – like other educational institutions – were sites where rules and regulations were established by the adults and then communicated to the children who were expected to abide by them. Rules concerned virtually all aspects of the children's lives in the institution: from how to play, eat, speak, or move, to what to wear and how to interact with other children and adults. Observing regulations was an important part of what proper preschoolers were expected to do, and – not surprisingly – when asked, children were able to immediately list all the regulations they had to remember:

> Krzysiu: We can't fight!
> Mruczek: And we can't go outside when we feel like it, and it's not allowed to run.
> Krzysiu: Right.
> Mruczek: And it's not allowed to hit a teacher.
> Brietta: We can't enter the kitchen and it's not allowed to do anything without asking.

Mruczek: We can't play football, we can't run.
Łatek: We can play!
Mruczek: But [not] in the preschool! (Preschool B, 17.04.2007)

The fact that, as children's comments reveal, the teachers introduced most regulations that were explicitly communicated points to the presence of what Bernstein (1996: 112) calls visible pedagogic practice. Visible pedagogy is one in which "the hierarchical relations between teacher and pupils, the rules of organization (sequence pace) and the criteria were explicit and so known to the pupils." Children knew precisely how they should act in the preschool, what they were allowed to do and what they were not, or how to relate to the adults. The existence of regulations of which children had no input was one of the indicators of the children's limited role in defining preschool reality. The teachers sometimes explained the rationale behind certain regulations, yet my conversations with children revealed that they were often not aware of the reasons for introducing specific rules.

The imposition of strictly defined rules and regulations entailed punishment for breaking them, and the teachers were those who disciplined. Both preschools developed a whole range of penalties, from relatively mild ones, such as being scolded, temporarily excluded from an activity, moved to another seat or being made to sit and think over one's behavior, to being taken to another (younger) group, sent to the principal for a talk or, in extreme cases, punished physically. While children, who knew the regulations and could recognize when they violated them, usually accepted sanctions without much protest, there were cases when they felt unfairly disciplined. This was a particularly common experience of "improper" preschoolers functioning as scapegoats.

It needs to be mentioned that sometimes the teachers were undertaking steps that could be perceived as aimed at lessening their control. Preschool A teachers claimed that they attempted to work out agreements with the children, specifying what the group would be doing during the day and for how long. This very interesting and quite ambiguous practice can be perceived simultaneously as a rupture, opening up the possibility of reconstructing child-adult relations and, due to the manner in which it was executed, a means of reinforcing the existing hierarchical structure. First, in an interview, Ms Zosia emphasized the importance of knowing what they would be doing and what the rules and teachers' expectations were for the children's sense of security. Moreover, both in our conversations and in interactions with children, the teachers often referred to making agreements. As Ms Małgorzata

said, the best way to work with the kids was "to make an agreement with them in the morning: Listen, we'll be doing this, and this, and that. We'll do this, and we'll go out. And they abide by it."[48] Agreements – made, as the teachers' claimed, collectively by the whole group – concerned not only the course of the activities, but also the children's conduct: their behavior toward others or rules they were expected to follow. As a result, in the event of kids' misbehavior, the teachers would remind children of the agreements they had made[49]. Already here it becomes easy to see the disciplinary function of the agreements, reinforced by the fact that, despite the teachers' use of "we" (standing for the whole group, both the staff and the kids) as the subject of agreement-making, adults' decision-making power appeared much larger than that of the children. In spite of their name, agreements resembled the teachers' announcements more than collectively developed rules:

> The teacher says that after the meal the kids will wash their hands and then they will work in their handbooks, and then will go on to play safely, reminding them that not all toys had been put back where they should be, and that they had to put the toys they took back in their places. (Preschool A, 26.11.2006)

Without attempting to negotiate with the children, the teacher merely states what the group is going to do and what rules the kids are expected to follow. In this way, a practice that could possibly provide an opportunity to reconstruct child-adult relations in a manner that would make it more likely for children to function as agents capable of shaping their own world (Mayall 2002: 21), turned into another means of reestablishing the teachers' dominant position of decision-makers. Discursively presenting children as actively

48 There was a clear gender dimension to this practice, at least in Ms Małgorzata's account. She frequently emphasizes that it functioned well with the boys in the group as they needed to move quickly from one activity to another, without spending a lot of time on them. Never did she reflect on the girls' attitudes toward this mode of working, which could result from the fact that both teachers seemed to perceive the boys as being in a much greater need of disciplining.

49 Ms Zosia: Damian, what are you doing? You are pushing your own friend. [To other kids:] Whom I should not give a reward?
Children: Damian.
Ms Zosia, to Damian: And you won't get anything. Do you know why?
Children: He pushed his friend.
Ms Zosia: And what have we agreed on?
Children: That we don't push each other. (Preschool A, 21.04.2005)

engaged in planning their activities and establishing rules, the teachers practically positioned children as objects of their own decisions[50].

The fact that the teachers were those who established rules, enforced adherence to them and punished children for a failure to do so had two important consequences. First of all, it reinforced the hierarchical differentiation between children and adults. The teachers, acting in line with the discourse and social practice that defined adults as having power over children, positioned themselves as an authority with the right to determine what a child's everyday world was to be like: what activities they could legitimately engage in, and therefore what they could experience. Adult-initiated rules prevented children from engaging in a wide range of physical activities the teachers deemed too dangerous. They kept them from being secretive with their friends away from the teachers' sight, and often from experimenting and exploring independently. In this way, their minority status was reinforced.

Yet, disciplinary power that operated through practices of establishing rules on all aspects of behavior and ensuring that they are followed, also had a positive, productive aspect. It constructed children as composed, mature, well-organized and able to control their own actions. It could also be argued that such a construction of children was necessary for constituting them further as rational learning subjects. Despite the declared propensity to use active teaching methods, Polish schools still rely on teaching approaches that emphasize the role of the teacher as a sole possessor of knowledge that children are expected to acquire. Children who are able to follow regulations, accept others' commands and refrain from questioning adults' authority fit such a model of education perfectly.

Rules and regulations were communicated not only through casual remarks the staff members would make in relation to children's specific actions, but also in explicit instruction concerning required conduct. In the previous chapters I mentioned some elements of such a formalized method of teaching proper conduct, pertaining to good manners or good behavior. The scope of this teaching was, however, much broader, and the forms it took were multiple. In the third year, Preschool A teachers developed a whole program aimed at eradicating aggression in the group. As a part of it, signs

50 This statement needs to be qualified. Since I spent only a limited time in the preschool, it is possible that I simply never happened to be around when teachers and children were collectively developing rules. The incidents that I witnessed, however, allow for such an interpretation.

saying "We don't shout" or "Be quiet" were displayed in the classroom. In both preschools the walls were decorated with posters representing good and bad behavior, particularly as far as interpersonal relationships were concerned (playing together in harmony vs. arguing or fighting; sharing toys and so on), which Preschool B teachers discussed in detail with children. In both institutions the teachers read books dealing with proper behavior to children, often relating events they talked about to actual situations that had taken place in the preschool, and proposed games and activities to do with these issues. One of the Preschool A teachers frequently employed a very specific and explicit form of rule teaching – a practice of "talks." The somewhat old-fashioned term she used to refer to this practice meant an easy to understand lecture on a topic considered important, e.g. having to do with health or safety, usually phrased in terms of obligations and restrictions and structured in the form of an exchange directed by the person (sometimes as expert) leading it. In the preschool such talks were usually triggered by the kids' misdemeanor the teacher considered serious enough to discuss at length with them, and they gave her an opportunity to review all the rules and regulations with the group.

As this discussion demonstrates, in the course of their everyday life in the preschool children were more or less explicitly informed as to what was expected from them. Contravening regulations was used by the teachers as an opportunity to indicate what kinds of behavior were not acceptable in the preschool. In this process the norms of proper conduct were established, as was a clear-cut hierarchy in which the staff members positioned themselves as those with the power to introduce regulations and enforce adherence to them (or to punish transgression). This visible pedagogic practice left no need for the children to discover what they should be doing; the only concern for them was to comply[51]. The same tendency was manifested in the way the adults organized the children's time and controlled their activities, although, as I will demonstrate in the following sections, there were significant differences between the preschools.

51 This stands in stark contrast to the situation of, for instance, Danish kindergarten children, who, in line with Bernstein's principle of invisible pedagogic practice, are demanded to "break the code," i.e., to find out on their own what is expected from them and do it, as if responding to their own needs and preferences (Warming, Kampmann 2007: 202).

# Control over time

Another indication of children's limited role in shaping the preschool world was the fact that they only marginally participated in making plans. Since teachers had to follow ready-made teaching programs that required them to plan their work on a daily, weekly, monthly and yearly basis, topics to be discussed every week were planned for the children. In very rare situations could the teachers introduce changes, e.g. extend a given topic to another week as a result of the children's interest in it, yet they were reluctant to do so due to the pressing need they felt to cover all of the planned material.

Days were also divided into blocks with strictly defined objectives, as the following exemplary daily schedules illustrate:

**PRESCHOOL A, YEAR 3:**
6.30-8.30: Individual work in small groups, activities stimulating senses and improving articulation, imitative and motor play, using the bathroom, washing hands
8.30-9.00: Breakfast
9.00-11.30: Work with the whole group: morning physical exercises, eurythmics, outings, walks and trips; theater workshop
11.30-12.00: Lunch (soup and dessert)
12.00-14.15: Therapeutic treatment of a child's nervous system: listening to music or stories; construction; calming activities; activating children
14.15-14.30: Lunch (second course)
14.30-17.00: Motor activities; consolidation of information acquired on a given day; playlet rehearsals; concerts; corrective-compensatory work with individual children; free play; cleaning up the room

**PRESCHOOL B, YEAR 3:**
6.30-8.00: Children arrive at the preschool; play in thematic corners
8.00-8.20: Work with individual children or in small groups
8.20-8.40: Morning physical exercises, getting ready for breakfast
8.40-9.00: Breakfast
9.00-10.30: Activities organized by the teachers, eurythmics, art activities, educational activities etc.
10.30-11.50: Free play in the preschool or on the playground
11.50-12.20: Preparation for lunch; lunch
12.20-14.00: Play organized by the teacher, listening to stories, games and jigsaws at the tables, working with books, teacher's individual work with children, going out to the playground
14.00-14.30: Lunch (second course)
14.30-15.30: Activities with the whole group, individual work, going out to the playground
15.30-17.00: Free play in the classroom

This rather strictly planned structure of a preschool day was not of the children's own making and they had a minimal impact on it – as opposed to adults, be it parents or generations of preschool staff who over the years developed practices and habits that organized daily life in the institutions. Obviously, there are justified reasons for such a situation: there are strict regulations concerning the space between meals and the maximum time children of a certain age can spend on educational activities; there is also a need to fit all basic teaching and extracurricular activities into the preschool schedule in such a way that children still have time for playing. Nonetheless, throughout my research I observed only a few incidents of teachers' agreeing to children's wishes to go out to the playground, and not a single incident of them replacing a teaching activity with play on the kids' request. On the other hand, the teachers in both institutions claimed that they adapted the way they carried out specific activities to the children's needs and interests ("for instance if the children didn't want to do something today, we would simply do it next time," as Ms Małgorzata said). The Preschool B principal perceived the ability to "go along with the child" toward what they find most interesting, rather than "sticking to the activity scenario," as one of the most important characteristics of a good teacher. Yet, in the context of quite rigidly planned days, such flexibility was of a rather marginal significance.

The analysis of the above schedules reveals one important difference between the two of them: while in the Preschool B daily schedule there were blocks of time reserved for children's free play, in the Preschool A schedule, free play was featured only marginally. This means that Preschool B children were given the opportunity to decide how to spend their time (although only within a specific time limit) – an option their Preschool A counterparts rarely had.

Because of the staff's control over the time, children's preschool experience could be claimed to have consisted in a constant shift between extremes: being hurried on the one hand, and having to wait on the other. Children were often rushed to finish their tasks and praised for working quickly:

> Ms Agnieszka hurries children, telling them that they do not need to make any fantastic coloring, just to do it fast so that they could move on to another activity: "Faster, faster. How long can you spend on coloring five fish or so? Kacper came late and he's already done with coloring. What a quick boy. Congratulations." (Preschool B, 24.10.2006)

The sense that there was not enough time and that children should be as efficient as possible – dressing up fast, eating fast, cleaning fast – was constantly present in both institutions[52], but equally common were incidents of children spending time doing nothing. Researchers studying Polish education institutions have pointed out that children spend a lot of time there waiting (cf. Siarkiewicz 2000), and my observations confirm this. In both preschools children waited a lot: for their turn speaking (which also meant for the teacher to allow them to speak), for the teachers to tell them what to do and to give them necessary materials, for their meals, and then for the permission to leave the table, or for other kids to finish their tasks so that everyone could move to another activity. The need to wait opened up a field to a full-fledged practice of reaching perfection in composure and restraint. Preschool A children could already have a Nutella sandwich in front of them, but were not allowed to start eating – only because an aide had not yet finished distributing plates and the children were supposed to sing a song. This points to a related requirement that children do things together. Going to the playground, eating or learning were the types of activities children could only perform simultaneously. Children had to come to terms with the fact that they would not be allowed to go outside when they felt like it or that they could not play when it was time for a learning activity. Refusing to comply with this rule could have dire consequences, as experienced by Harcon who, despite saying that he was hungry, was denied a second helping because he started his lunch when the others were about to finish theirs ("You should have eaten when you were given the food, now we are collecting it," he was told). However, the demand to synchronize one's actions with those of the others extended to the smallest aspects of the children's daily life. A child could be forbidden from beginning another task in her handbook because some children had not completed the previous one, or from going to the bathroom because the kids were all supposed to have already done it, or were to go later as a group. A requirement to wait was accompanied by an openly expressed expectation that children would not complain about it, but instead would stay calm and quiet – a prolonged waiting period was not an excuse for

52 This could result from the work organization in the preschools and the relatively high number of activities (regular educational activities, extracurricular activities, play time, meals) and special events that had to be included in the schedule. The teachers, while rushing children, themselves recognized the problematic aspects of the fact that preschoolers did not have sufficient time for both playing and learning at their own pace.

starting to talk or play with others[53]. This again shows how the teachers' control over preschool time functioned as a technique of producing composed and restrained children.

## Control over activities

> [In the 18th century] there was also a military dream of society; its fundamental reference was not to the state of nature, but the meticulously subordinated cogs of a machine, not to the primal social contract, but to permanent coercions, not to fundamental rights, but to indefinitely progressive forms of training, not to the general will, but to automatic docility. (Foucault 1979a: 169)

In one of the casual conversions I had with Ms Agnieszka, she mentioned that the kids were not listening to the teachers, and added, laughing, that she would like it to be like in the army: she tells them what to do, and it is immediately done. The ideal of the army – with, typical of it, surveillance, close regulation, order-giving and the expectations that commands will be immediately followed – was constantly present in the preschools: much in line with Foucault's famous observation that the prison resembles factories, schools, army barrack or hospitals that in turn resemble prisons (Foucault 1979a: 228). Besides the strict planning of the general framework of children's activities and the insistence that the kids adhere to it, the teachers in both institutions regulated details of specific activities. Two examples illustrate it clearly:

> Ms Malgorzata gives Ania a duck to color and explains: "Ania, paint the duck yellow, the apron blue, the legs red, the beak red, and the bow red too. Start with the yellow, and then add the details. You [to other girls] will paint the cat gray or brown."
> She points to different colors they can use to paint the cat. One of the girls points to pink paint. Ms Malgorzata: "What? A pink cat? We can make some pink ornaments afterwards."

53 Such an approach to time is in stark contrast to solutions adopted by institutions based on alternative approaches to early childhood education, such as, for instance, Reggio Emilia, where children's sense of time is the primary principle and, as a result, children are given enough time to complete their work at their own pace (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence 1999: 60).

> Ania is painting, the teacher tells her to use more intense colors. There is also a pharmacy in the picture, and Ms Małgorzata tells Ania what colors to use ("The windows can be yellow and the door brown"). Ania is listening, but then asks: "Can I color it the way I like?" (Preschool A, 28.02.2007)

> Children are collecting their toys before the meal. Ms Agnieszka urges them, saying that if they don't clean up, they won't play after the meal. Finally they all sit down on the carpet. A girl from group 2 holds a little toy pony. Ms Agnieszka says that it will be quite difficult for her to wash her hands while holding a pony, and tells her to put in on the windowsill. Cornelia says that the girl wanted to wash the pony's hoofs. Ms Agnieszka: "There will be no hoof washing." She takes the pony away from the girl and puts it on a table. (Preschool B, 07.02.2007)

Both excerpts demonstrate how the adults attempt to (more or less successfully) influence children's activities: from what and how to color, to what to do (and not to do) with toys. The teachers plan children's every step and prevent them from putting their ideas in practice. They do it in an entirely arbitrary manner, as there seems to be no other reason for the teachers' bans and orders than the fact that the girls' ideas did not conform to the adults' perception of what the world is like (e.g. there are no pink cats) or of what can be done to maintain order (washing hands, but not toy animal's hoofs, which could possibly result in a mess and take extra time). Given this arbitrariness, it could be claimed that the main practical function of the teachers' bans here was to strengthen the hierarchical structure in which the teachers positioned themselves as those who can control every detail of children's behavior and to maintain the construction of the preschool as a place where strict rules and regulations are in practice and need to be followed.

The close control of children's activities was particularly visible in Preschool A in the context of the so-called free play. Despite its name, most of the time (with some exceptions during the final year) children had very little say in issues such as which toys to play with, for how long and where. They might have been told to perform a particular activity collectively (e.g. singing, drawing, working with plasticine) – which also meant that they could not withdraw from an activity if they did not feel like participating in it. They might have also been required to play with only a fairly limited selection of toys (constructing blocks, board games, jigsaw puzzles, etc.), or in a restricted area (usually at the tables, very rarely in the whole room, including the carpet area).

This stood in stark contrast to the practices in Preschool B, where the teacher's words "Now you can play" meant that children could take any toys they wanted, go with them anywhere they liked in the whole room and play as long as they stood interested in a given activity (yet within the given time limits). Not only did the teachers allow such spontaneity, but also stimulated it, e.g. by telling children who wandered around the room doing nothing and looking bored to find an activity for themselves. Teachers would also suggest some activities, yet explicitly giving children the right to refuse to participate in them.

Bernstein (1975: 7) talks about play as a concept that is basic to invisible pedagogy. The invisible pedagogy is characterized by an implicit rather than explicit teacher's control over children and creating a context in which children are expected to explore. Other characteristics include the children's power over what to do and how to structure their activities, or their control over personal relationships (*ibid.*: 6). Free play can be seen as such an arranged context in which children can determine what they will do, who they will interact with and how they will structure their time. Yet, Bernstein maintains, while playing children become "available to the teacher's screening" as teachers observe them, evaluate their play and on that basis, diagnose any potential developmental problems. Play therefore enables "a total – but invisible – surveillance of the child": children's acts are assessed as to whether they reflect the rules and norms of behavior that a child is expected to have internalized without necessarily being aware of, or explicitly taught (*ibid.*: 7).

This ambiguity of play was evident in preschool practices. Preschool B – and to a lesser extent Preschool A – children could organize their free play on their own, yet they were under constant scrutiny of a teacher who would also intervene if the children's behavior deviated from established norms. Those norms, as I demonstrated earlier, were often explicitly taught (unlike in Bernstein's conception of invisible pedagogy). The children did not have to be reminded about them before or during their free play – and in Preschool B they usually were not – yet they were expected to act in line with them. One could say that the children could play freely as long as they played in a way the adults wanted them to. In fact the children's inability to follow the rules they should know and abide by was given by a Preschool A teacher as a reason why the children there were rarely allowed to play on their own:

> I know one thing, and it has been like that more than once, when we [the teachers] had to go somewhere and [the aide] allowed them to do what they wanted to do, there were huge problems with cleaning up, and we've decided

> that if we limit them in terms of the play space, and they in a way had to depend on each other, on this smaller group, then they collaborated somehow differently, because otherwise they would just run around and there would only be screaming and noise. (Ms Małgorzata, Preschool A, interview, 2007)

As this extract indicates, in the teacher's opinion the children did not internalize regulations such as the need to play quietly, not to run and to clean up. The staff's response to this incompetence was to turn to visible pedagogical practice and determine children's actions by specifying where they could play, with what toys and in what way.

The difference in the presence of free play in each of the two preschools allows for making some observations. It suggests that the teachers in each institution had different ideas as to what children are like and how they should be treated, as well as the pedagogical approach the teachers should take, either visible or invisible. Thus, to a degree, in each of the places children were produced as different subjects: as dependent on adults, requiring control and incapable of organizing their own activities in Preschool A, and more autonomous, self-responsible and self-governing in Preschool B.

## Control over space

A final dimension of the teachers' dominant role in preschool was their control over space. First, the adults' zone was constructed around the teacher's desk which children had no free access to. However, while in both preschools children theoretically could use the rest of the space and all the equipment in the room[54], in reality they could often do it only when allowed to by the teachers. In Preschool A the organization of free play meant that even then children were only allowed to play with some toys. Access to drawing materials was also limited. Moreover, the fact that, in principle, children were not allowed to leave the room alone implied that most of the preschool space was usually beyond their reach. As a result, the classroom door acquired symbolic meaning. Its function as a disciplinary instrument was particularly visible in

54 There was usually no physical barrier that would prevent the children from having access to toys and other items as most of them (and in particular those that children liked playing with) were within the children's reach. Falkiewicz-Szult (2007: 125-127) records numerous examples of preschool groups where children could not freely use toys that were intentionally placed on high shelves or in locked cabinets.

Preschool A. In one sense, it was used by the teachers for the purpose of ensuring a definite enclosure:

> While the kids are playing, Ms Małgorzata locks the door to the other room. The lock is placed high up and none of the kids could possibly reach it. At some point one of children tries to open the door and cannot do it. Ms Małgorzata say that it is locked. (Preschool A, 13.03.2006)

In this incident the teacher used the door in order to contain all the children in one space so that she could keep them under surveillance. By using the lock that only she could reach, she also emphasized her status of a privileged adult.

The door could also serve a punitive function, when the teacher would refuse to unlock it until the children had finished cleaning up. Moreover, while children could not leave the room at will (thus the very common practice of lining up at the door and waiting for the teacher's permission to go), the teachers had the right to request them to do so as a penalty[55]. In this way the door became a symbolic and material instrument of exclusion:

> The teacher drags Harcon out of the room, saying: "You don't rule here. I rule here." Harcon is crying and resists. The teacher comes back to the room and closes the door. Harcon is screaming in the corridor. (Preschool A, 22.09.2006)

Closing or locking a child out of a room could therefore be used as a disciplinary technique for coping with disobedient children and, simultaneously, establishing the teachers' dominant status.

Preschool A had yet another way of utilizing the spatial organization in such a way as to announce and reinforce the teachers' special status. In both preschools there were buzzers in each room, which parents had to use when coming to pick up their child. While in Preschool B children customarily answered the buzzer, in Preschool A only the teachers had the right to do so[56]. This in itself reconfirmed their higher position in the preschool structure, which was further emphasized by their threats that they would not answer the

55 This, obviously, is in direct contradiction to the regulation that obliged the teachers to look after the children all the time, and as such could be considered an illegal form of punishment.

56 However, during one year the children had the opportunity to take up a function of an "attendant" sitting next to the buzzer and informing a teacher when it rang if the rest of the group was playing in another room, or sometimes even answering the buzzer themselves.

buzzer when the children were too loud or misbehaved. Through such practices the preschool space became symbolically divided into the children's and the adults' spheres and could function as an instrument to construct and reinforce their different status.

## Summary

Mayall (2002) develops the conception of childhood as a minority status and points to three dimensions of it: the fact that childhood is perceived as a time of dependency and subordination; that it is adults who have the power to shape the main sites of childhood, i.e., school and home, thus determining what a child's experience is like; and a widely shared belief that children need socializing. Technologies of power and dominance discussed in this and the previous chapters are closely related to the first two dimensions: through surveillance of children's behavior, control over their activities and refusal to grant them decision-making power with respect to their lives in the preschool, the teachers positioned children as subordinated and unable to shape the world around them. As my analysis indicates, such practices were more widespread – especially in their more extreme form – in Preschool A, which may suggest that both positioning of children and adults as distinct groups and the acceptance (even if unconscious and unintentional) of a child's minority status were more typical of this institution than of Preschool B. Yet, the distinction should not be overemphasized. Preschool B teachers also held control over the children's lives: they decided what should be done and when, ensured that children follow regulations, and punished them for deviations. Moreover, in both preschools the teachers acted on their belief in the need to socialize children, to teach them the norms and rules of proper behavior, and to turn them into rational, reasonable and reliable members of society. It could be argued that despite the differences in the specific manner in which child-adult relations were produced in each of the preschools, the hierarchical generational order was still retained in both of them.

I indicated that some of the differences between the practices observable in the two preschools could be linked to the adherence to distinct pedagogical approaches that Bernstein (2003) terms visible and invisible. He relates them to social classes, drawing a connection between the invisible pedagogy and middle-class milieus. While my data did not allow me to carry out any systematic class analysis, such a link can also be tentatively established in my

research. Preschool A, where teaching practices resembled what Bernstein terms visible pedagogy, could be characterized as a rather working class setting. Preschool B on the other hand, which was attended by children from better educated families in a more privileged socioeconomic position, moved closer toward invisible pedagogy. Nevertheless, the distinction between the two preschools was not clear-cut. In some contexts Preschool B children were indeed constructed as reliable, able to act on their own and independent to a much larger degree than their Preschool A peers. Still, practices such as explicit rule-teaching, adults control over children (through establishing rules of conduct, detailed planning of daily schedules or structuring activities) or establishing clear power hierarchies, were easily discernible in both places. It could be argued that the main difference consisted in Preschool B's greater willingness to abandon such practices. Still, that small move already made a significant difference in the way power operated and children were positioned in the preschool.

Finally, it needs to be noticed that although many of the technologies I analyzed are present in other educational settings, they can take different shapes and work to establish different constructions of the child. For instance, several contributions to *Nordic Childhoods and Early Education* (Einarsdottir and Wagner 2006) emphasize the significance of giving children space to structure their time on their own and make their own choices. Writing about Norway childcare institutions, Strand (2006: 73) claims that "Norwegian children must be protected from adult oversupervision and control, be allowed to play unhampered in nature, and to choose freely their own activities." In a similar vein, Pramling Samuelsson (2006: 106), discussing the case of Sweden, points out that "it is typical in Swedish practice for children to be able to decide most of the day whether they prefer to be indoors or outdoors. ... Swedish preschool children often discuss with their teachers what topic or theme they would like to work on, which toys they would like to buy, and how they would like to celebrate a special occasion." Obviously, behind such arrangements there is a specific construction of a child: responsible for their own learning, resourceful, willing to develop and self-controlled (Herman 2000, Kampmann 2004). While such children may not be necessarily directly supervised, their behavior will still be monitored to ensure that it adheres to the norm and corrected if it does not. It could be said in a Foucaultian vocabulary that they were constituted as different, self-governing, subjects. As I will demonstrate in Chapter 9, this is the kind of subject position that at least some of the children in my research aspired to.

# 8. Between resistance and hierarchy construction. Children's responses to teachers' dominance

> In order to understand what power relations are about, perhaps we should investigate the forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociate these relations.
>
> (Foucault 1982: 11)

In the two previous chapters I analyzed practices whereby teachers established hierarchical structures in which they positioned themselves as the powerful ones, securing for themselves – by virtue of their age, social position, and knowledge or experience – the right to control children's preschool lives. The analysis might suggest that children function in such relationships as passive and submissive, incapacitated and easily directed. Such an image, however, is not entirely adequate. As critics of socialization theories observe, children are active participants of socialization process, capable of opposing adults' instructions (Connell 1987: 195). Children's attempts to challenge adults' authority and assume control over their own lives can even be considered the main characteristic of children's culture (Corsaro 1990:17; Corsaro, Eder 1990: 204). More generally, Foucault's analyses of ways in which power operates show clearly that relations of power are not one-directional and always involve forms of resistance and avoidance:

> [I]n human relations, whatever they are ... power is always present: ... the relationships in which one wishes to direct the behavior of another. These are the relationships that one can find at different levels, under different forms: these relationships of power are changeable relations, i.e., they can modify themselves, they are not given once and for all. ... These relationships of power are then changeable, reversible and unstable.
>
> (Foucault 1998: 11-12)

Taking this observation as a starting point, in the first part of this chapter I discuss the changing and fluctuating relations of power in the preschools. I do this by analyzing a range of techniques invented and employed by children in

order to resist the adults' power and control. Doing so, I demonstrate how some of these techniques, taking the form of open power games, were effective enough to render teachers virtually powerless. From a Foucaultian perspective, the analysis of children's resistance has to be founded on the assumption of the children's ability to act, instead of their total subordination:

> [T]here cannot be relations of power unless the subjects are free. If one or the other were completely at the disposition of the other and became his thing, an object on which he can exercise an infinite and unlimited violence, there would not be relations of power. In order to exercise relations of power, there must be on both sides at least a certain form of liberty. ... in the relations of power, there is necessarily the possibility of resistance, for if there were no possibility of resistance – of violent resistance, of escape, of ruse, of strategies that reverse the situation – there would be no relations of power.
>
> (Foucault 1998: 12)

Foucault (1998: 19) makes a distinction between relations of power in which subjects are free in the sense of being capable of resistance, and states of domination where they are entirely deprived of the possibility to act. It can be argued that in the hierarchical generational order of preschool there was always a danger for the adult-child relationships to approximate the domination side of the distinction, yet, as I will demonstrate, children were not willing to subordinate unconditionally.

Children's resistance, however, was only one way in which they responded to the processes of hierarchy construction of which they were a part. While functioning in the framework of adult-child hierarchical structures, children also worked to establish other hierarchical structures – this time within their own peer groups. Doing so, they often employed techniques they knew from their interactions with adults. In the second part of the chapter I will concentrate on the processes whereby children positioned themselves as members of hierarchically structured groups organized around categories of age, gender and preschool membership. I will also briefly discuss the issue of the attractiveness of taking dominant positions for children.

## Children's resistance

As I have pointed out in the previous chapters, preschool children were fully aware of the fact that adults ruled in the preschool while children had to

follow regulations. They recognized their subordinate status and – as children in Mayall's (2002) studies – could describe its specific features, such as the need to obey teachers, the inability to make choices concerning their own activities, or constant supervision. At the same time, however, they developed a range of techniques that enabled them to individually and collectively resist the adults' dominance, question their authority and attempt to create spaces in which they could have more agency. To some extent this was an obvious response to the highly regulated character of the setting in which they spent a significant part of their lives. As Edwards (2003: 14) points out, "home and school represents arenas of action whose structures and rules provide resources that children can subvert, appropriate and manipulate in dealing with parents' and teachers' agendas and in working out their own." The sheer existence of rules and regulations led children to invent ways of coping with or going against them.

The persistence of children's resistance to adult regulations is widely recognized in educational research and practice, and prompts Corsaro (1990) to conceive of it as a routine: "it is a daily occurrence in the nursery school and is produced in a style that is easily recognizable to members of the peer culture" (17). Spaulding's (1997) analysis of young children's resistance strategies, which she terms micropolitics, clearly demonstrates that children are aware of each other's tactics, can assess their adequacy and efficiency in the context of achieving their own goals, as well as decide whether or not to join in. This was also the case of the preschoolers I observed. In the previous chapters I have briefly mentioned some of the resistance techniques they employed; what follows now is a detailed analysis. The focus is on the ways in which children's resistance resulted in shifting power relations and how it challenged the assumed reasonableness of preschool rules and regulations.

## Open defiance, passive resistance

Children's resistance was directed against norms, rules and regulations that structured their preschool lives. Yet, by defying them, children also challenged the normative ideal of a proper preschooler. Since one of the main features of this ideal was obedience, understood as listening to a teacher and following her instructions, the bulk of children's resistance consisted in rejecting the adults' orders. One of the simplest and most common techniques that the children used for this purpose was ignoring teachers' instructions: pretending

they did not hear them or failing to do what they were asked to do. Here are two typical examples:

> Will and Taranee start pushing each other. Ms Patrycja: "Will, get up." Will does not get up, the teacher keeps on reading and then adds: "Will has some problems with her hearing. Please get up." Will does not get up. (Preschool B, 27.03.2007)

> Cornelia and Taranee are playing on the jungle gym; they are hanging on a bar with their heads down. Ms Agnieszka tells them to stop, stating that they cannot do this. They keep on playing. (Preschool B, 23.05.2006)

As these excerpts demonstrate, such a technique could be quite efficient as the teachers, faced with children's persistent lack of reaction, might decide not to push them further and to stop paying attention to them. (Obviously, they could also impose more severe measures.) This rather basic technique of not reacting to the teacher's words – with silence itself becoming a tool of resistance – could develop into a more explicit rejections of an adult's request:

> Subaru sits on Maks' chair, and Maks is trying to take it back; they start pushing each other a bit. The teacher: "Maks, please come here to me." Maks: "No." The teacher repeats her words a couple of times, but Maks does not react. (Preschool A, 31.10.2006)

This simple technique of saying "no" to a teacher appears quite a powerful means of resistance in the light of the importance of the obedience principle discussed in Chapter 4. Preschool generational order was based on the assumption that children do what they are requested and do not argue about it. Their openly expressed unwillingness to do so therefore threatened the stability of the preschool social order. Although in both preschools children more often than not followed teachers' instructions, they sometimes used this open resistance technique when they did not want to participate in an activity. Two incidents from Preschool A show different possible scenarios that could develop as the result of a child's refusal to follow a teacher's order:

> In a religion class the children are supposed to draw a family member who passed away. Maks says that he does not feel like doing it. The teacher: "But I feel like you doing it." Then she tells him again to draw; he says again that he does not feel like it. The teacher: "So there will be no stamp" [The teacher stamped the kids' works as a reward.]. Maks looks a bit concerned, but he closes his handbook. The teacher: "Put it on the shelf." He does that, and goes first to his seat, and then onto the carpet where he starts playing. (Preschool A, 31.10.2006)

> Children are sitting at their desks waiting for the teacher to hand them sheets of paper. Rafał is talking. Ms Zosia approaches him and asks: "Are you going to listen to me or not?" Rafał: "I don't feel like it." Ms Zosia: "So you won't get it [the sheet of paper]." She walks few steps away and then she is back, saying: "And do you want to go to another group? Who am I talking to? To Rafał or to someone else?" She gives him a sheet of paper and adds: "Either you do it, or you will go to another group." (Preschool A, 23.02.2006)

In both situations the children did not want to participate in a teacher-directed activity and explicitly expressed their lack of interest in it. Both teachers appeared to be rather unwilling to accept such acts of defiance that challenged the preschool social order and tried to reinforce their dominant position of those who had to be obeyed: the religion teacher by referring to her assumed authority ("I feel like you doing it") and both by threatening the rebellious boys with punishment. The religion teacher's attempt to induce Maks to do what she wanted him to do failed – as he decided playing was more attractive than getting a stamp in his handbook – which she accepted. In contrast to her, Ms Zosia employed a series of techniques aimed at making Rafał follow her order. Trying to "blackmail" him was not effective – he talked precisely because he did not want to play with paper – so she used more powerful threats. The situation ended with Rafał sitting at his table doing nothing for a long while (which again can be perceived as a form of resistance), and only later deciding to briefly fold the paper. As an act of breaching a silently accepted rule which stated that tasks had to be carried out properly, failing to perform a given activity carefully enough can itself be considered a means of resistance. Children in both preschools often did what they were asked to do as quickly as possible, without paying much attention to the quality of their performance. This technique was frequently used when children were asked to perform tasks they found meaningless (e.g. stand up and count to five when they were too loud), but also during educational activities. Some of the children resorted to it when a given activity lasted too long and children wanted to start playing. This is demonstrated in the following excerpt from Preschool A, which also sheds light on other techniques of resistance:

> Children have slips of paper with syllables and are supposed to make words out of them. Ola makes the word "tits." She shows it to Ania and asks her to read it out. Ania reads it quietly and refuses to read it out. Ms Małgorzata comes to check how the children are doing. Ola holds her two slips of paper up and close to her face so that the teacher does not see her word, but Ms Małgorzata takes them from her, briefly looks at them and rearranges them, making a meaningless word, and then rearranges some other words that Ania

> made. There are a few syllables left and the teacher says: "OK, now you have to think up something, I won't help you any more." I suggest to Ola that maybe she could rearrange some of the words so that she uses more of the syllables, but she says that she prefers to glue those words she has already made so that she is done sooner. (Preschool A, 10.04.2007)

Refusal to work diligently on a task is an obvious resistance technique here, but the way in which Ola played with her words is interesting. Making a word with sexual connotations and secretly showing it to Ania – who immediately recognized its character – made it possible for the girls to enter a forbidden territory, which the fact that Ms Malgorzata changed Ola's perfectly correct word made clear. Sexuality was to a large extent a taboo subject in Preschool A, and therefore acting in a manner that had sexual innuendoes constituted an illegal activity. This in itself was a very powerful resistance technique, frequently used by children, and I will discuss it in more detail in a later part of this chapter.

Children's resistance can be perceived as aimed at gaining control over their lives (Corsaro 1990: 17). This implies that children attempted to define their reality in various ways: what they could do, what they liked or disliked, or how they felt. As I have demonstrated in Chapters 6 and 7, children were often practically prevented from making such definitions, and hence their attempts to do so can be considered acts of open defiance. First, they tried to decide on their own which activities were allowed and which were not:

> Marcin invites Harcon and Dorota to play in the kitchen corner. Dorota asks whether they can do this. Marcin answers: Yes, we can. They run to the kitchen corner. The teacher notices it and tells them to come back to their table. (Preschool A, 21.04.2005)

In spite of the children's lack of success – as the teacher requested them to play where they were expected to play – important here is their readiness to decide on their own what they could do and to follow their decision. Doing so, they positioned themselves as agents, thus threatening the teacher's status of a primary decision maker. Her reaction can be interpreted as a response to this threat. Preschool B children had greater autonomy in choosing their activities than children in Preschool A, and rarely had to resort to such methods of securing the possibility of doing what they wanted to. Yet, they still tried to determine what they could do in other contexts, for instance which playground and what equipment to play on (as they would sometimes venture to a playground they were often not allowed to use, or to ride on their

favorite forbidden merry-go-round), sometimes coming up with complex explanations as to why they were (or should be) allowed to carry out a specific activity[57]. Children in both places also tried to define details of a given activity (resisting therefore the teachers' very close control of their actions), and sometimes did it in a playful manner:

> The English teacher explains how to carry out a task. They have to put dwarf stickers in a picture in their handbooks. Harcon takes one dwarf and says that he will stick it upside down. He looks at me, smiles and asks the teacher whether he can put the dwarf upside down. The teacher says: "Not really." She approaches him, takes the dwarf and places it with its head up. Harcon takes the sticker back from her and sticks it upside down. (Preschool A, 28.05.2007)

Here, Harcon challenges both the adult's perception of the world (reflected in the way the teacher wanted the boy to arrange the dwarfs) and her attempt to decide what the children should do. His act of resistance is fairly innocent, yet through it he manages to establish himself as acting in his own way and following his ideas.

Some of the children's attempts to redefine their experience can be interpreted as aimed at dealing with unpleasant aspects of preschool reality. In line with Goffman (1961: 189), this could be considered "secondary adjustments," which he defines as "any habitual arrangement by which a member of an organization employs unauthorized means, or obtains unauthorized ends, or both, thus getting around the organization's assumptions as to what he should do and get and hence what he should be." This can be exemplified best by the manner in which children approached one of the most severe forms of punishment, i.e., that of being sent to the youngest group. As Króliczek (Preschool B) put it, "It is very, very quiet there and you can just sit there"; Ben from Preschool A also recalled an instance of being told to go to the youngest group and lie in bed, which he found "quite comfortable" especially since he was tired. In this way children managed to overturn the dominant understanding of a punishment: what was meant to be one of the harshest penalties becomes a synonym of rest, relaxation and peace. Rather than being upset with the punishment, the children turned it

57 They would claim, for instance, that they could ride the merry-go-round because "what would it have been built for otherwise," as one child said; Króliczek also maintained that it was her father who constructed it for everyone to use.

into a pleasant experience. In this way they succeeded in depriving penalty of its crucial component, thus making it entirely ineffective.

As if responding to the number of regulations they had to abide by, Preschool A children invented a whole range of techniques whereby they effectively exposed the apparent absurdity of many rules or tried to adjust them to their own needs. Meal time proved a particularly rich source of inspiration for new forms of resistance. First, children would often reject the principle of eating nicely. They purposefully made all sorts of sounds, played with their food, sometimes spit – often inventing justifications for their deeds:

> Subaru is eating with his fingers; the teacher tells him to use a fork. He is laughing.
> Ms Malgorzata: We don't eat this way.
> Another boy: We do, we do.
> Ms Malgorzata: Do you want to go to the kiddies to see how to eat properly?
> Subaru: We eat with our fingers at home. (Preschool A, 23.10.2006)

Subaru referred here to eating habits in his family, which the teacher could not know (even though she could – as anyone in the room – expect them to be rather different from what he presented), as a justification for his behavior. Another child supported him in his act of defiance by questioning the rule Ms Malgorzata evoked. There can be various interpretations of such children's actions. First, they can be seen as an attempt to cope with the regulations the preschool staff tried to impose on them. Constantly reminded to behave well while eating, the children responded by doing just the opposite. At the same time, however, such actions – while effective in a short run as they gave the children some sense of agency and power (at least insofar as they could see the teachers losing their temper) – ultimately could lead to the reinforcement of adult prejudices concerning children (Mayall 2000: 49). Misbehaving during their meals (as well as in other contexts), children seemed to confirm teachers' perception of them: as "uncivilized," unable to follow socially accepted norms and regulations, unreliable, and therefore in need of control and strict rule-teaching. This suggests that some forms of children's resistance were in fact counterproductive, which itself can be interpreted as an indication of their subordinate status: it could be argued that in certain contexts children had no access to efficient means of resistance, and all their actions could only reinforce their inferior status.

Another rule, frequently resisted in both preschools, had to do with bringing in one's own toys. Just like kindergarten children in Italy and the United States studied by Corsaro (1990), the kids I observed had to abide by

very strict regulations concerning bringing in their own toys: they could do it only on Fridays. As my conversations with the kids revealed, they were not quite aware of the rationale behind this much disliked regulation. They responded to it by resorting to various secondary adjustment techniques, in the first place by bringing very small toys or other objects that could be held in a clenched fist or hidden in a pocket or even in a shoe so that the teachers could not see them[58]. While most of the children tried to make sure the teachers did not realize they broke the rule and kept their items hidden at all times while in the room – and would only confess to their friends that they had something in their pocket but were going to show it to them only on the playground – others decided to challenge the teachers' instructions more openly and played with their toys. They risked being shouted at and told to take their toys to the cloakroom, but they often managed to play with them for quite a while without the teacher's intervention. Possibly the satisfaction they got from going against the rule and engaging in a pleasurable activity in which they were entirely autonomous outweighed the potential punishment.

Secondary adjustment techniques were also used when children wanted to redefine their play so that it appeared legitimate. Especially common in this context was resorting to what Goffman (1961: 207) calls "make-do's," referring to the practice of using "available artifacts in a manner and for an end not officially intended." In one incident, Preschool A boys built sticks and a goal with blocks and started playing hockey in their room. Their teacher requested them to stop the game and take the goal apart, to which one boy responded by getting on all fours next to the goal, barking and saying that he was a dog and the block construction was his kennel. The teacher did not object to this.

While the children's resistance techniques discussed so far were aimed mostly at broadening the scope of the control they had over their preschool lives, some of them had an additional quality of efficiently revealing the inadequacy of some structural arrangements in the preschool. For instance, while in principle children could refrain from eating what they disliked, the teachers often insisted on them having at least some of their meals. A group

58 Obviously, the teachers – just like those in Corsaro's (1990) research – were aware of these transgressions, but sometimes decided not to intervene. In some cases they used the fact that children brought in their toys for their own purposes. For instance, in one incident in Preschool A, the teacher took away a play car from a boy who brought it from home on a Thursday, and said she would give it back to him only when the group calms down and allows her say what she wanted to tell them.

of friends in Preschool A responded to this by eating parts of each other's meal, as in this example:

> Niko: I've eaten for Ola! [There is an empty plate in front of Ola.]
> Ola: He always eats for me if there is something I don't like. (Preschool A, 23.04.2007)

A few other kids participated in this practice that could be perceived as a response to an arrangement in which children who disliked a given dish were sometimes forced to eat it anyway, while those who asked for a second helping could not get it. Here the kids organized – albeit in a limited scope only – the food distribution in such a way that suited their needs best. Although chastised by the teachers when they noticed it, the children managed to influence their daily lives in preschool to some extent. Certainly the manner in which they did this – by resorting to a rather illegal action – was far from what is usually conceived as children's agency, i.e., the possibility to negotiate with others in such a way that it would bring about change. Such an understanding of agency is based on the assumption that children actually have a chance to express, openly and legitimately, their opinions (Mayall 2002: 21, Närvänen and Näsman 2007: 238). Children were not asked how meals should be organized (although, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 9, they had their views on it); instead, attempting to find the best way of coping with an arrangement that was imposed on them, they invented their own solutions and put them into practice.

## Children's secret life

Besides using more or less open resistance techniques, the children developed a whole range of techniques that could be interpreted as an attempt to create their own independent space where they would be invisible to adults and could do whatever they liked. In both preschools children tried to get away from the teachers' gaze and, when unseen, acted in ways they were not exactly supposed to. These attempts to create "free spaces" (Goffman 1961: 230) could be seen as a response to surveillance experienced by the children. Not being able to legitimately be on their own, children invented ways to do so anyway.

The first, and the most basic technique was hiding: under tables or other pieces of furniture, curtains, doors:

> Dorota and Kamila are trying to hide under a table, but the teacher notices them and tells them to get out of there. Dorota says that they need to find a place where the teacher will not see them. They start getting under another table. I look at them; Dorota puts a finger on her mouth and says: "Quiet, not a single word." After a while the teacher notices them, shouts "Dorota" and the girls get from under the table and run to the other room. The teacher notices it after a while and shouts, "Dorota, it's not going to be like this!" (Preschool A, 23.02.2006)

What is striking here is the conflict between the girls' need for privacy and the teacher's insistence on them refraining from hiding. The girls knew they should not hide – which Dorota's request that I keep quiet makes clear – and still they undertook several attempts to get away from the teacher's sight. As I will demonstrate in detail in Chapter 9, being alone and not seen by adults was very important for children. The following incident appears to be a child's protest against the lack of children's own space:

> There is a narrow gap between the kitchen corner and a wall; Subaru stands there and keeps very quiet. The teacher does not see him. She quiets the kids down and notices that Subaru is not at his place. She asks the children where he is and tells someone to call him. She looks around the room, clearly trying to spot Subaru, and then she leaves the room. When she is out of the room, Subaru gets out of his corner and stands by the wall. The teacher returns, sees him and says: "Where were you? I have already gone to the playground to look for you." (Preschool A, 28.05.2007)

Subaru was aware of the fact that he was not supposed to hide and that the teacher would worry about him. He chose a means he knew would disturb the teacher in order to indicate what he needed and wanted. Since he did not even use his "invisible" space to play, his act can be therefore perceived as pure protest against the lack of privacy[59].

Children often openly stated that they enjoyed being alone, as it happened in Preschool A when a group of boys sneaked out to another room and closed the door, stating that now the teacher would not see them any longer. Both preschool buildings offered some spaces that could give children

59 I do not want to downplay the legitimacy of the teacher's fear and distress in such a situation. The teachers were fully responsible for children's safety and well-being, and would be held accountable had anything happened to a child they had failed to keep an eye on. As I will demonstrate in Chapter 10, in order to respond to children's needs (e.g. for privacy) the teachers had to be able to manage their own anxiety. This was a challenging task, which the degree of tension experienced by the teacher in the incident above makes clear.

a chance to be alone (bathrooms and cloakrooms), yet their access to them was very limited. As a result, children invented techniques that would make it possible to use them more often. The means they resorted to were often a skillful and creative reworking of the preschool rules. One of these rules stated that the kids were not allowed to go to the cloakroom on their own. However, there was an exception to it: children could go to the cloakroom if they were in possession of something that had to be kept there, e.g. clothes they were not wearing at a given moment or a picture they drew and wanted to take home. Thus, if children wanted to go to the cloakroom to talk or to show to each other toys they had brought, they would draw something fast and request – and, more often than not, obtain – a teacher's permission to take their picture to the cloakroom. As a result, they could spend quite a long time there without the teachers getting involved. Goffman (1961: 210) refers to similar practices in terms of "'working' the system," by which he understands "an extension and elaboration of existing sources of legitimate satisfactions, or the exploitation of a whole routine of official activity for private ends." As he emphasizes, working of the system requires a fairly good knowledge of its rules, which preschool children certainly had.

Some of the children's private spaces were stable – such as wooden houses on the Preschool B playground, possibly the only site where children legitimately could be alone without the need for any excuse – while others were created ad hoc, when a teacher looked away, went out of the room for a while or was in a different part of the playground. All of them served a similar purpose. First of all, they were used because of the sheer joy of being alone. Children found moments when they were on their own very pleasurable, and this experience itself could be construed as resistance. As Gordon (2000: 153) observes, "pleasure can be inherently disruptive in schools ... Pleasure and desire seem to open up spaces for freedom and authenticity." In the children's efforts to create their "free spaces" this opening acquires a literal meaning. Having closed themselves off from the adults, preschool kids could start developing ways of acting vastly different from what they did in their teachers' presence, and taking great delight in it. For instance, having closed the door, Preschool A boys mentioned earlier started playing a game that consisted in sneaking out to the corridor or to another group's room without being noticed. The boys took great pride in carrying out this task successfully. In other cases children used invisible spaces in order to engage in activities they enjoyed but did not want the teachers to notice, be it kissing or talking or playing in ways that were not allowed. This could be

anything from playing soldiers and shooting, to rolling on the floor, jumping, running around, playing on forbidden pieces of playground equipment, to using swearwords. Using swearwords or distorting slogans or texts they were expected to repeat – especially employing notions related to the body and sexuality – was in itself a resistance technique. So, for instance, when Kindergarten A children went for a march around the neighborhood on Earth Day and were told to chant "Respect the Earth," some of them changed it into "Respect the ass" or "Hold your penis." This technique was particularly visible in Preschool A and might have had to do with severe restrictions and stigmatization of sexuality taking place there on a regular basis. The free places could also be an arena for children's illegitimate sexual fantasies, as the following conversation with Dorota on the subject of making love with the boys illustrates:

> Dorota: We make love.
> KG: And what do you do?
> Dorota: We'll give [him] some poison, some bread and some pills, he will smell it and we make love.
> KG: Where do you make love?
> Dorota: We make love here.
> KG: And do the teachers see you?
> Dorota: No, they don't see us at all.
> KG: Do you hide somewhere?
> Dorota: We kiss in the preschool.
> KG: But in such a way that they see you or that they don't?
> Dorota: So that they don't.
> KG: And where do you go so that they don't see you?
> Dorota: We go to the bathroom, and we kiss, drink wine. Not for real. (Preschool A, 7.04.2005)

Dorota is playing with a number of rules, norms and taboos operating in the preschool: the ideal of an asexual, innocent child (discussed in Chapter 4), the normative construction of activities appropriate for children, teachers' surveillance and supervision of children. Dorota, whom the teachers considered inappropriately interested in sexuality, was rather skillful in exploiting the adults' sexual panic and often disturbed the staff by saying that she was "ready to show the boys her tits" or pretending to be making love or kissing with boys. Reprimanded for it and thus aware that she was breaking rules, Dorota seemed to take great joy in getting openly involved in illegal activities.

My discussion so far seems to indicate an ambiguous character of children's attempts to create their own independent spaces. One the one hand, creating such spaces was a precondition for engaging in pleasurable activities usually forbidden in the "surveillance space" (Goffman 1961: 228). Significantly, these were frequently activities that stood in stark contrast to the dominant model of a proper preschooler that the institutions tried to forge. When unobserved, the children were spontaneous, loud, enthusiastic, and daring – far from the ideal of a constrained, controlled and quiet child. While some of their activities could be perceived as potentially dangerous[60], in most cases these were activities which the teachers did not in principle banned, but largely restricted the children's access to. Creating independent spaces in which to break rules appears therefore to be a means for the children to ensure that they can do what they enjoy, and what adult-made regulations prevent them from doing legitimately. From this perspective, the children fight for the preschool to be a place adjusted to their needs and interests rather than organized by principles the adults prescribe to. At the same time, however, Mayall's (2000: 49) comment on children's tactics of reasserting their rights that can lead to the reinforcement of adult prejudices is particularly relevant here. Children seem to be caught in a double bind. Adopting such illegal strategies in most cases is the only way for them to ensure that they can respond to some of their needs. At the same time, while doing so, the children appeared to be unreliable, not worthy of being treated seriously and counted on. Obviously, such a judgement of the children was possible only in light of adult-made regulations, but it was these regulations that structured the preschool world and provided a framework in which to judge children's actions.

## Power games

What I have discussed thus far were, generally speaking, resistance techniques that led to what can be termed, following Goffman (1961) and Corsaro (1990), as the underlife of the preschool. By means of secondary adjustments or passive resistance the children managed to create at least restricted free spaces where they could function (relatively) independently of the adults.

60 Yet, as I was able to observe, when getting engaged in such illegal and potentially dangerous activities, children were very careful and attentive, reminded each other to watch out and tried to make sure that none of them gets hurt – and, indeed, none did.

Common for these techniques was a very limited degree of conflict they entailed. In fact the principle behind them was to keep away from adults' view and to avoid interactions with them. Yet some of them – those that involved elements of direct rejection, such as saying "no" to a teacher's command – if failed, could result in a more open confrontation. Such "power games" in which teachers and adults positioned themselves at opposite sides were much more typical of Preschool A than Preschool B. This could be attributed to a tighter control and surveillance of children in the former than in the latter. It could also have to do with Preschool A teachers' perception of children as unruly and wild, and needing to be tamed and brought in line. Engaging in "power games" with the adults, the children openly challenged the ideal of a submissive, obedient and well-behaved child and questioned the teachers' status of an authority who needs to be respected and listened to. As a result, it is in the context of the openly confrontational resistance techniques that Foucault's concept of power as circulating and floating from one person to another appears particularly useful. As Foucault states:

> Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain, it is never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation.
>
> (Foucault 1980b: 98)

The teachers' dominant position in the preschool generational order could not ensure that they were always powerful. They never simply held power; instead, they had to employ a range of techniques to establish themselves as the powerful ones. As Närvänen and Näsman (2007: 242) emphasize, children have access to power resources (often inherent in the generational order) that they can draw on to counterbalance the adults' dominance. Emotional ties that connect them with adults or their membership in a disadvantaged social category (the fact that they are children) are examples of such resources. In the preschool context, children could also use their knowledge of specific institutional regulations, i.e., of the fact that staff members were not allowed to hit them or carry out some of their threats legitimately (e.g. leaving someone in the preschool when an entire group was to go for a trip). Possibly, the fact that their teachers were women could also play a role, given the

context of a society where violence and disrespect toward women are common. Children might have as well been aware of the teachers' low social status and used it as a resource[61]. Moreover, children could draw on their sheer numerical dominance and their friendship ties as a resource, especially when confronted with a new teacher who was not acquainted with them and was unaware of the group dynamic. Tellingly, Ms Agnieszka, when recalling her first year in Preschool B, referred to it as "horrible":

> I started working in April, and with the oldest group. It was good for my figure because I lost some five kilograms in two months with no effort whatsoever. I was so stressed out. These were kids who had been together in one group for four years. I was a totally new person, a stranger to them, who they did not know. And such children can manipulate people. So I did not know their names, who was who, how they behaved; all this was new. And they were at the end of the road. They were about to leave the preschool. So they felt strong. And I, seemingly an adult, was like a helpless creature. So that was terrible. (Ms Agnieszka, Preschool B, interview, 2007)

Ms Agnieszka's position in the age structure (an adult) and her status as a teacher were not sufficient to prevent her from finding herself powerless when confronted with a group of children who knew each other well and who could draw on commonly shared resources, and whom she did not know. Other teachers recalled similar experiences, as illustrated by an excerpt from a conversation between Ms Małgorzata and Ms Zosia, Preschool A teachers:

> Ms Zosia: I just lost my nerve once and I simply cried. I couldn't stand them [the children]. I took them out to the playground and I was just a bundle of nerves and got in tears.
> Ms Małgorzata: But these little devils can really get on your nerves and you are just grabbed by the throat, and the next moment you hear from the other side: But I love you! And you just can't do anything. (Preschool A, 10.05.2006)

As this exchange indicates, children could competently play emotional games where they balanced between making teachers lose their temper and expressing their sympathy for them. Children knew very well that the teachers appreciated the kids' warm feelings toward them and could draw on this as a resource as well, just as the girls in Spaulding's (1997: 123) research, who knew that "when you say those things ['You're so pretty,' 'I love you,' etc.], that helps Mrs. Cole feel good about herself and it helps us." I also observed children

61 The teachers underscored that the children were not as respectful as children were in the past when they were taught deference by their parents.

hugging their teachers, sitting on their lap or telling them that they loved them. Even though the children never expressed the political meaning of these acts as openly as those Spaudling talked to, Ms Małgorzata's comment reveals their subversive potential.

The power games in which children tried to challenge the adults' dominant position and to establish themselves as more powerful could take various forms, ranging from – as already indicated – ignoring a teacher's instructions directed at a particular child either by not responding to them or openly refusing to follow them, to ridiculing the teacher (as in the case of Basia who, seeing the teacher take a toy away from another child, said laughingly that the teacher was going to play) or calling them names. Yet the clearest form was an open confrontation in front of other children who played the role of a – far from impartial – audience. The following situation exemplifies most of the features of this strategy:

> Harcon puts his chair next to the table at which I sit, but Ms Małgorzata wants him to move to his table. He does not react to what she is saying for a long time, and then suddenly gets up, puts the chair on his head and walks in the direction of his table. The teacher sees him with the chair on his head, angrily takes it from him and puts it on the floor, grabs his hand and pulls him violently toward his table. He manages to free himself while other kids shout: "Hide, hide!"
> The teacher: Harcon, please leave the room.
> Harcon: I don't want to.
> The teacher: Listen. You cause trouble and disturb the whole group. Goodbye.
> Harcon: No.
> The teacher: You can say this to your grandma. Please go out.
> Harcon: I don't want to go out.
> He starts running away from the teacher. She takes his chair and puts it in the corridor, then begins to chase him around the room and catches him after a while. The rest of the children laugh as if they were cheering Harcon on. The teacher leads Harcon to the corridor, goes back into the room, locks the door and leans against it. Harcon knocks on the door and shouts that he wants to come in, but the teacher does not react. (Preschool A, 7.04.2005)

Both Harcon and Ms Małgorzata drew on various resources to gain control of the situation and establish themselves as powerful. Ms Małgorzata's main resource seemed to be her position of a teacher. She construed it as a position of authority that enables her to give commands and, when this fails, to resort to physical means of coercion (taking the chair away from Harcon and pulling him in a desired direction). Harcon, on the other hand, utilized a whole range

of strategies: from ignoring the teacher, openly rejecting her instructions, and finally drawing on his status of a child and hers of an adult when he escaped the teacher. He was aware that Ms Małgorzata would not feel comfortable chasing him, as the fact that it took a while before she actually started chasing him seems to confirm. Moreover, he drew on his friends' support as a resource, which ultimately meant that the teacher confronted not only him, but the whole group. What is particularly important in this excerpt is that at no point can the teacher be perceived as being (fully) in control of the situation. Even her last move, i.e., making Harcon leave the room and locking him out, can be interpreted as her ultimate defeat: apparently lacking the means of keeping control, she was forced to resort to an illegitimate solution. The child – with his peers' support – appeared to hold enough power to make her pedagogical project fail. Unable to communicate and negotiate with him, she was forced to throw him out of the room. In fact it can be argued that all instances of teachers' violence against children revealed their powerlessness in a confrontation with a child exceptionally skilled in power games. I will return to this issue in Chapter 10, when discussing the teachers' view on the preschool life.

## The lure of power

Responding to adults' power and their own subordination, children were taking a range of different subject positions. Resigning to their status of those who had to politely obey and putting their own interests and preferences aside was one option that most children at least occasionally chose. Employing various resistance techniques, as discussed in the previous section, was another possibility. Still another option was the somewhat ambiguous practice of taking up the position of a dominant person and disciplining other children. In both preschools children would tell others what to do and what not to do, criticize others for their misbehavior or "tell on them" to a teacher. Doing so, children drew on their knowledge of norms and regulations structuring preschool life as well as on the expectations toward children in the institution, as demonstrated in the following excerpt:

> A few kids are sitting at a desk. Alladynka gets up and walks toward a cupboard; Piękna tells Harcon that Alladynka is trying to fetch something even though the teacher did not allow it. It turns out that Alladynka takes dominoes and then puts them back into a box; it seems to me she is putting

> two sets in one box. Harcon tells her: "We don't play this way in the preschool." Anita is lying on the table. Niko walks by and says: "We don't lie." (Preschool A, 4.06.2007)

Several children participated in this instance of the reinforcement of the existing preschool order with its rules and regulations: Piękna taking notice of Alladynka's transgression and making it public; Harcon informing the girl about the proper way of handling games, Niko trying to ensure that Anita uses her body in a legitimate manner. In the process they all reenacted responses they observed from their teachers, positioning themselves as the powerful ones who had the right to enforce rules. While in this incident children acted in their own group, sometimes they could involve a teacher in the process, telling her about a given child's misbehavior. In other cases they positioned themselves as active disciplinary agents, meting out a form of punishment themselves:

> During a religion class children sit in a circle. The teacher asks a question; kids raise their hands. Sebastian is trying hard to say something, he moves to the center of the circle. Niko grabs him and pulls him back to the circle. (Preschool A, 14.04.2005)

Niko plays a teacher in this example: controlling a child's use of their body and bringing them in line if they acted outside the norm was a teacher's task. Significantly, the teachers often both discouraged children from disciplining others, informing them that they should let a teacher know about a transgression, and – in a somewhat self-contradictory manner – criticized them for tattling on others. This indicates that children had to make very careful strategic choices as to whether to communicate to the teacher if a child was misbehaving or not.

The practice of playing disciplinary agents appears quite ambiguous. First, it can be seen as a means of changing dichotomous child-adult relationships by calling into question the homogeneity of children as a simply dependent group. By positioning themselves as disciplinary agents, some children constructed their status as the competent ones, having knowledge of norms and regulations to be abided by in the preschool and therefore entitled to act when they saw others transgress. By doing so, they assumed some of the teacher's responsibilities, thus indicating that, to an extent, they could play the teacher's role. This was particularly visible when older, more experienced children informed younger ones about the intricacies of preschool life, not

necessarily with the intention of disciplining them, but rather playing the role of a friendly guide.

At the same time, however, playing disciplinary agents was an indication of children's compliance with the existing order which was thus naturalized and strengthened. Yet, this was an order the children themselves disliked and resisted at other times so it could be claimed that they acted against their own interest. Besides naturalizing specific rules and norms concerning a proper child's behavior, children as disciplinary agents reinforced the hierarchical structure as such. In their own interactions in peer groups they reenacted principles that organized their own relationships with the teachers: the idea that there is a competent, knowledgeable person who judges others' awareness of rules and the extent of their compliance with them.

There is no doubt that taking a dominant position was attractive to the children, who openly expressed their desire to rule:

> Taranee sits on the teacher's seat, at the teacher's desk, and says that she will be the teacher. She tells the children: "You can play" and pretends she is eating [the teacher had her dinner at the desk just before]. (Preschool B, 18.12.2006)

> Alladynka says she would like to work in the preschool. She says: "I will rule. The teacher rules in the preschool." (Preschool A, 28.02.2007)

These are only examples of numerous incidences that clearly show that children valued and desired positions that could give them the possibility of influencing others' behavior. Functioning in a deeply hierarchical and inequitable society, they became aware of the prestige and privileges that go along with the highest positions. Preschool was yet another area in which they experienced their own subordination and dependence, and possibly did so on a more intensive and regular basis than elsewhere (cf. Mayall 2002). But it was also a place where children could sometimes legitimately play the dominant ones. As already indicated, teachers encouraged children to keep an eye on and assess each other, sometimes explicitly inviting them to take up the position of a supervisor:

> The kids lie on the carpet. Ms Zosia takes a chair, puts it next to them and sits on it. Zigzag does not want to lie and sits next to her, soon after Cyprian joins him. The teacher tells them that they will watch over the kids and they will see how hard a job this is. The boys quickly get the idea and repeat: Quiet, don't talk! Don't chat! Don't fool around! (Preschool A, 6.04.2006)

The boys took great pleasure in telling other kids what to do and what to refrain from, being just like a teacher. In a similar vein, games in which one child could give other kids commands were common and very popular in Preschool A. The teachers invited children to play in this way and reinforced the hierarchical order established in the course of the game by reminding children about the privileges related to having the lead position ("Did he tell you to speak? Now he is the master. When you are here [on the spot taken by the leader] you will be the master," as Ms Zosia told the kids). Hierarchical order was the fabric of the preschool. It structured the relationships between adults and children, and it was reflected in the children's own peer relationships. This issue will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

## Hierarchical order of children's peer groups

As I tried to demonstrate in the previous chapters, preschool generational order was inherently hierarchical. Even though children actively rejected their inferior status, they frequently experienced subordination and restriction of their rights. In this process they became fully aware of the prevalence and significance of hierarchies, but also aspired to dominant positions. In the first section I demonstrated how they attempted to raise their status in relation to adults. However, they also did so in relation to other kids, using a whole range of means. Being a proficient reader who could read stories to other children was one of them. Another was bringing an object to play with to the preschool or inventing a play, which gave a child the right to specify the rules and to decide who can join. Being in possession of any other item considered attractive – books, children's magazines, collections of stickers or various cards – had a similar effect. I frequently witnessed incidents in which kids forbade some of their peers access to an activity in which a toy or another object they brought was used. In both preschools there were groups of kids (mostly girls) who shared a passion for collecting cards with images of cartoon characters or animals, and access to them was quite difficult for children whose parents did not want to or could not buy them folders and cards. Exchanging cards was one of the favorite activities of members of these groups, and as a result children's popularity and status could be influenced by the quality and quantity of cards they brought as well as their readiness to share them with others.

Structures that ensued from such practices were temporary and fluctuating, although some children – in particular those especially creative and resourceful – were more successful in maintaining a dominant position than others. Nonetheless, establishing and retaining one's privileged status required skillfully managing one's actions as it could be easily threatened and lost. In one incident, Króliczek, usually successful in positioning herself as a leader, wanted to play chess with a few kids. She told them where to sit and what to do, and clearly tried to be in control of the situation. But as the game progressed, it became clear that she did not really know how to play: she frequently made basic mistakes and the children had to explain to her that she could not make certain moves at all. Yet, she kept on directing others:

> She tells a child with whom she is playing: "I will beat you for sure. Go ahead and think of which one you can move." Then she plays with other children: Taranee, Kuba from group 2 and Piotrek who beat her very quickly (one of the kids says that she cannot play at all); finally with Cornelia. At some point Cornelia gets up and says that she will not play with such a liar. Filemonka adds: "Because you only want to win, Króliczek." Króliczek looks for a child to play with, but there is nobody. Finally she says to Kuba: "You will play chess with me. Please." Kuba: "Why?" Króliczek: "Just because. Because nobody wants to play with me." Kuba: "Nobody likes you, right?" (Preschool B, 7.02.2007)

As this excerpt shows, children's position in the group had to be constantly negotiated and skillfully worked out. Króliczek, from a person in charge of an activity (which initially attracted quite a few kids) changed into someone who was left alone and feeling rather powerless, and her dramatically threatened position was immediately recognized by a younger boy. Knowledge of the rules of the game and a willingness to abide by them and to play fair proved more important than the ability to initiate an activity. The option of moving out of the game turned out to be a powerful means of resistance that the kids decided to employ to counter Króliczek's attempts to dominate. Preschool social structures were certainly very complex and called for an ability to take various factors into consideration as well as to strike a balance between directing other's steps and backing off when needed.

Yet, some of the structural patterns that developed in the preschool were more stable than others. Among these were structures based on, often intersecting, categories of age, gender and belonging to the preschool. The rest of this chapter will deal with practices whereby children established their positions in a hierarchical order organized around these three categories.

## Age

Age was one of the most visible criteria in organizing children's interpersonal relationships. The preschool institution itself provided children with a structure that rendered age differentiation inevitable by dividing them into separate age groups. However, children participated in the construction of their status as members of an age category. They could easily discuss advantages and disadvantages of being an older or younger kid, as well as indicate how a child of a specific age should behave.

When discussing the processes whereby children constructed age structures, it needs to be remembered that an exact biological age here is of lesser importance than age as a socially constructed phenomenon. Children relatively rarely pointed to their specific age, but they often positioned themselves as older or younger and therefore having different rights and opportunities. Närvänen and Näsman (2007: 228), paraphrasing Fenstermaker and West (2000), talk about "doing age" and conceive of age as a situated accomplishment that structures interaction and is produced through it. Normative conceptions of what is appropriate for individuals of a specific age function as a context for the practice of doing age. This practice is carried out with consideration for others who assess the correctness of the performance. Children constantly carried out this kind of assessment, calling each other to account for their actions with a reference to their age – such as Filemonka, reminding Króliczek that she should tie her shoelaces herself because she was already six. Doing so, they both drew on and constructed a hierarchical age order. This is a reason why, as Närvänen and Näsman (2007: 229) claim, age categories can be construed as "positioned categories." As they say, "there is an age order inherent in age categorization that positions categories in relation to one another in terms of status differences, constituting an age-based hierarchy." In their discussion they concentrate mostly on broad categories of childhood, adolescence and adulthood, but the same processes take place within these categories, for instance when children constitute themselves as younger or older in relation to other children.

In children's daily practice, being younger – in comparison both to other kids and to adults – was tantamount to being inferior. Calling a child "a baby" was frequently employed by some kids to offend others, while one kid could be heard saying to another during an argument, "Don't talk to me like to a child." Age could also be evoked to highlight inappropriate behavior: as Filemonka once claimed angrily, "all the small children tattled on the big children." Age structures opportunities, as Närvänen and Näsman (2007: 231)

emphasize, and the established inferiority of the younger ones translated into age-specific division of space:

> We look through the window and see kids on the playground. Kacper says that the kiddies are on their playground; someone adds that they are not allowed to be here. (Preschool B, 15.05.2007)

> Harry is playing on monkey bars. I remember that some time ago children were not allowed to play there, so I ask him if it is allowed now. He says that now they are older and can play there. (Preschool A, 20.02.2007)

The children drew on age-related regulations imposed by adults as a resource which they used to position themselves as having specific rights the younger children did not have, or that they did not have themselves when they were younger. Doing so, they reinforced the hierarchical age order with privileges ascribed or denied to different age categories. Referring to one's status as the older one could also be a means of defense, as in this excerpt from an incident in Preschool B in which younger girls tried to kiss older boys:

> Maciek tries to defend himself. He takes the cover from a box with blocks and uses it as a shield, hiding behind it and pushing the girls with it. Dorota says: "We are about to kiss you." He responds: "Go and kiss yourself. Don't mess with the older ones." (Preschool B, 10.10.2006)

In an interplay of age and gender Maciek, attacked by girls, resorted to positioning himself as an older child, who might be dangerous if provoked. In a similar vein, children could tell others to go away and leave them alone because they were older. This functioned then as a means for children to establish themselves as powerful. Yet, given the contextual character of doing age, under certain circumstances being younger was perceived as a potential source of privilege. In an argument over the order of drawing, 5-year-old Dorota claimed that 6-year-old Brietta and Filemonka should let her draw first because "one should give way to the 5-year-olds." This shows that using age in order to attain one's goals was a strategic endeavor that required skillful playing with available discourses concerning the rights and opportunities open to different age groups. Dorota drew here on the notion of the need to care for the younger ones and treat them in a special way; Maciek seemed to be alluding to treating the older kids with respect.

Yet, since the subject positions the children were taking were complex, they often drew on age in relation to other categories, such as gender or preschool membership. Later in this section I will discuss some examples of

the practices of establishing hierarchical structures on the basis of these intersecting categories.

## Gender

The analysis of hierarchical order based on gender poses some difficulty. While children openly expressed their convictions concerning age-differentiated access to opportunities and rights, this was less explicit in relation to gender. Still, on the level of everyday practice, children employed a wide range of means to position themselves as separate groups of girls and boys. While in Preschool B such practices usually did not entail explicit negative assessment of the other gender group, in Preschool A they were frequently accompanied by boys' violence against girls as well as other acts that emphasized (and constructed) boys' dominant position.

The boys' violence against girls was certainly the most powerful instrument of establishing the girls' subordinate status. Although I observed instances of girls' violence against boys, they were much less frequent and played a different role. Preschool B girls made attempts to gain some power over the boys, but the instruments they used to this end rarely entailed violence, especially its more direct, physical forms. The girls could, for instance, threaten the boys with kissing them or – what for several weeks was quite a popular activity on the Preschool B playground – try to scare them with bugs. Yet, all these practices were performed in a mostly playful manner, with all participants sharing the recognition of them as a form of amusement, and for this reason interpreting them as violence would be ungrounded. The situation was slightly different in Preschool A, where girls' violence against boys was more common (especially in the younger groups, where I observed girls pulling boys' hair or pinching them) and certainly not playful. The preschools also differ with respect to boys' violence against girls. In Preschool B I witnessed only single instances of a girl being hit by a boy who would be immediately scolded for his behavior by a teacher. Preschool A boys could be seen relatively often physically attack girls with the purpose of inflicting harm on them: spanking them, kicking or pushing. They reacted violently to a whole range of girls' actions: their willingness to play with the same toys as the boys, their saying or doing something the boys did not like; sometimes they did it for no specific reason. A spank could be reinforced by a negative assessment of a girl. For instance, Subaru, who spotted girls take some blocks he

apparently planned to play with, warned them: "I don't like you, stupid girls. I will smack your ass," and indeed spanked one of them.

In general, violence against girls appeared to be an indispensable aspect of the children's discourse on gender relations. Subaru's reaction in the excerpt above is one illustration, but the following conversation between 3- to 4-year-old Preschool B children is even more instructive in this respect:

> Malec: My mom will buy a doll for me one day.
> Kacper: But you don't need a doll.
> Malec: Yes I do.
> Kacper: So you will become a girl.
> Malec: Yes.
> Kacper: So I will hit you then and you'll be crying.
> Ola: Just as I am crying when Bartek hits me.
> Malec: I won't cry at all. (Preschool B, 21.02.2005)

Malec's interest in dolls appears to be a sufficient reason to conceive of him as a potential girl, yet still more interesting is the readiness with which Kacper sketched events that would ensue from Malec's turning into a girl. In the boy's perception, boys' violence against girls, and the suffering of the latter (with crying as its indication) are clearly a characteristic feature of gender relations. Yet, in the children's daily practice and discourse on gender relations, violence was frequently accompanied by what Polish feminists refer to as a "knight discourse" (cf. Walczewska 2000). Boys' attacks on girls were usually immediately countered by other boys' acts of defending the girls. In both preschools the boys, including those who could be seen hit girls at other times, claimed that "you don't beat girls," that "you don't take toys away from girls" or that "girls should be first." Although apparently self-contradictory, such actions seem to mirror some aspects of Polish patriarchal culture, in which widespread violence against women goes hand in hand with an insistence on the need to express respect for women through symbolic gestures and an emphasis on women's unique position in society.

Besides using violence, boys – in particular those in Preschool A – attempted to establish their position as superior by showing disrespect for girls' activities. They could disregard them as not deserving any interest:

> One of the girls asks me if I want to play "Witch." I ask her what it is. Cyprian says that it is a stupid game for girls. I ask him why it is stupid; he says because it is for girls. (Preschool A, 9.01.2007)

I often observed preschool A boys destroy girls' works or take toys they were playing with away from them. Significantly, girls often appeared incapable of protesting efficiently, as in the following situation:

> Alladynka and Piękna are sitting in a sandbox; they are building something on the sandbox rim. Harcon comes; he starts walking along the rim and steps on the constructions the girls built. They look at it helplessly; none of them says anything, they just start rebuilding their works. Soon after another boy comes and destroys their construction. This time Piękna protests, but later Harcon comes again, saying that he needs some sand, and he takes a handful from the girls' construction. (Preschool A, 6.06.2007)

Preschool B girls were usually able to successfully defend themselves against similar attacks, which were also much less frequent there. This was not the only difference between the girls' positions in the two preschools. Activities that girls enjoyed were also perceived and valued differently in the two places. For instance, the W.I.T.C.H. cartoon series, referred to by the Preschool A girl in the excerpt above, was extremely popular among the girls in preschool B as well. Girls were recognized as being enthusiastic about it, and although some boys expressed their derision for it, several claimed to be interested in it and sometimes attempted to join the girls who were reading the W.I.T.C.H. stories or exchanging cards with images of the Little Witches. Yet, the girls maintained that it was "not for the boys" and denied them access. In this way, rather than being ridiculed for their passion, they managed to render it – at least temporarily – an object of the boys' aspiration and envy.

Similar acts of excluding children of the opposite gender from certain activities occurred in both places. In both preschools girls were excluded from playing football. In Preschool A I did not witness any instances of a girl attempting to join (which indicates the scope of the girls' exclusion from the game), while in Preschool B the football field was an arena of frequent gender-based conflicts with Cornelia fighting, as the only girl, for access. Preschool B boys also restricted the girls' access to computer games, while Preschool A girls denied the boys the right to play French skipping. While such practices are a powerful instrument of gender differentiation, I am rather hesitant, however, to conceive of them as serving to establish hierarchical gender order. Specific children could certainly experience their own exclusion from a given activity as an act of positioning them as inferior in comparison to those of the opposite gender who were included. Yet the reversibility of such practices renders their role in the development of any more stable hierarchies problematic. What they do indicate, though, is the fluctuation of

power: one's gender was both a means whereby to constitute one's own group and exclude some children – of the opposite gender – and the reason for one's own exclusion from other groups and activities.

As I mentioned, Preschool A girls seemed to be positioned as inferior to boys from their groups to a much larger extent than those from Preschool B. They were usually much more powerless and incapable of defending themselves than the Preschool B girls. A number of reasons for this differentiation can be suggested. As mentioned in Chapter 4, while in Preschool B the number of girls and boys in the group was almost equal, in Preschool A boys both outnumbered the girls and attracted more attention from their teachers. The Preschool A teachers' attitudes toward the girls were also ambiguous. They could say that although there were fewer girls than boys, the girls were worse than the boys whom they provoked into misbehaving, which in light of my observations was a fairly inadequate assessment. Under such circumstances, the boys could feel entitled to act in a dominant manner toward the girls, which was reinforced by the teachers' limited response to such behavior. In one incident, a few boys kept taking away construction blocks from Weronika and Piękna. The girls tried to reason with them for a long time, explaining that they needed the blocks and did not like it when the boys were taking them away, but failed to make the boys stop. Finally they decided to enlist the help of Ms Zosia, but she said that they had to come to an agreement on their own. Hearing this, one of the boys reacted: "They will never come to an agreement with us." The teacher's refusal to intervene in a situation where the girls were clearly unable to counterbalance the boys' dominance on their own worked to reinforce their subordinate position, while reassuring the boys that they did not have to take the girls' needs and wishes seriously. Although the teachers sometimes took a more active stance, they never discussed the issue of violence against girls with the children. At most, they encouraged the girls to fight back.

Furthermore, the majority of girls in the Preschool A group were younger than most of the boys. In their final year, when the group consisted of both 5- and 6-year-olds, only two girls were six. In addition, the 5-year-old girls were also physically smaller, and all of them were new in the group. Younger, physically weaker, and inexperienced, the girls could certainly face serious problems defending themselves against the boys' violence. The importance of their age and length of stay in the preschool is best demonstrated by the fact that the two 6-year-old girls, although new in the group (but not in the preschool), were much more efficient in defending

themselves against the boys. In a similar vein, Preschool B girls, the majority of whom were the same age as many of the boys, and who had been in preschool from the beginning, did not experience such an imbalance as the younger girls in Preschool A and were therefore better equipped to protect themselves from the boys' potential attacks. They were also supported by their teachers, who condemned all acts of violence in the group, being quite attentive to those against girls.

The way in which children position themselves is therefore an outcome of the interplay of a number of intersecting categories. In feminist theory and methodology the notion of intersectionality has been used as a remedy to an often inadequate conceptualization of the situation of women experiencing multiple forms of discrimination (Crenshaw 1994 and 2000). It is a move away from an additive approach to oppression inasmuch as it tries to determine how oppression on various grounds produces a distinct experience for a person who faces it, rather than perceiving these different types of oppression as adding to one's burden (AWID 2004: 2). Applied to the analysis of a situation of other social groups, the intersectionality approach aims to capture the interplay of categories such as gender, ethnicity, age, economic status or sexuality in the process of establishing some positions as marginalized or troubled (Staunæs 2003: 101). In the context of research on children, Prout and James (1997: 8) emphasize that childhood, as a variable of social analysis, has to always be considered in relation to other variables, such as class, gender or ethnicity. Indeed, different intersecting factors were at play in the preschools, working to produce hierarchical structures in the group. The marginalized position of some girls in Preschool A cannot be explained just by pointing to single factors. It is precisely because of the interplay of the girls' age, gender and time they spent in the preschool that boys felt empowered to threaten them. This was easily visible in conflict situations when, for instance, boys would refer to them as "little stinky babies" or "the little ones" and would simultaneously form groups with other boys to chase girls or attack them physically. In the preschool context, the categories of age and gender intertwined with categories that were relevant within the group, such as a proficient reader or a resourceful, creative child. When children interacted with kids who did not attend their preschool, preschool membership proved to be a highly important structuring category.

## Preschool membership

With all children being Polish, both preschools were rather ethnically homogenous. However, Preschool A was located in a neighborhood inhabited by Roma families, and even though Roma children did not attend the preschool, they could be met on the playground or during trips. Although preschool kids sometimes mentioned them, the teachers rarely commented on their presence. I once heard a teacher who, seeing a few Roma children join in during a preschool trip, asked another in a condescending tone: "And what are those Gypsies doing here?" On another occasion a teacher explained to children that a Roma girl behaved well and could play on the preschool playground. Nonetheless, Roma children functioned as outsiders – sometimes troublesome, sometimes dangerous. For instance, the children who were told that the Roma girl could stay on the playground responded by saying that "she used to be a witch but now she behaves well, she is good." Harcon claimed that he learned his swearwords from "Gypsies who come to the playground after preschool." Yet, the teachers never used the presence of Roma children in the preschool children's environment as an opportunity to discuss issues pertaining to minorities – even though events such as European Day were organized for children to learn about other cultures. Meanwhile, some of the kids used Roma children in order to position themselves as legitimate preschool members having special rights. What follows is an account of an incident that took place on the Preschool A playground:

> There is a Roma girl in the sandbox. She is sitting among the boys and is making a sand cake. She disturbs them a little; she takes sand away from them or makes holes in their constructions. They look slightly irritated and say that she disturbs them, but do not address her directly. After a while Patryk says that he does not like her; Maks adds that he does not either. I ask them why; Maks says: "Because she's not from our preschool." Then they start addressing her.
> Harcon: Hey, you, get out of here. You can't play here.
> I ask him why she can't.
> Harcon: Because the teacher didn't allow it.
> Kudłaty and Zak are also building, and Kudłaty says every once in a while that "this black" destroys what they do.
> Maks, to the girl: This is not your preschool.
> Subaru: Get out of here.
> Patryk: Exactly, get out of here.
> She seems not to be paying any attention to them and keeps on building; sometimes she takes some sand away from the boys. They get increasingly angry and the atmosphere feels more and more unfriendly.

> After a while Patryk asks what her name is. She responds quietly, but it seems that Patryk has not heard her. Harcon looks at Ronaldino, but he has not understood either. I tell her that the boys could not hear her and suggest that she repeat her name, and she says "Szakira."
> Then the two of us move to another part of the sandbox and now the boys come and take sand away from her. Every once in a while someone says that she is a Gypsy. She continues playing.
> Harcon stands on the sandbox rim, makes sand balls and tries to throw them at the girl. He misses, but tries again few more times. She moves away and finally sits on my other side, farther away from Harcon. Harcon loudly calls her; he wants her to look at him. Ronaldino tells her that Harcon is calling her. Harcon is holding a sand ball and it is clear that he is waiting for her to turn around so that he can throw it at her. I look at him and make a sign indicating that he should not do it. He nods his head, indicating that he is going to do it. I shake mine. Finally he throws the sand ball on the ground.
> A boy I do not know approaches Szakira and tells her to go with him to see something. She does not move for a while and eventually gets up and they both leave the playground. (Preschool A, 6.10.2006)

This situation is an illustration of how the boys attempted to cope with the Other, simultaneously positioning themselves as powerful and dominant. Although they complain that Szakira disturbs them, it seems that the interplay of facts that she is different from them and does not belong to the group is the core of the problem. In an ethnocentric gesture Maks claims that he does not like her because she is not from their preschool. The boys repeat that she is a Gypsy or a Black, which indicates that, although they are not entirely clear about who she is, they know that she is certainly not one of them. It is her otherness that prevents them from approaching her directly. They complain about her actions and express their dislike for her, but it takes several minutes before they actually address her – quite a difference compared to their usual way of solving conflicts, when they would immediately approach a troublesome child. When they finally start interacting with her, their main purpose is to chase her away, either by telling her to leave or by attacking her physically.

In this way the boys exclude Szakira in a double sense: first, as someone who is not a preschool member ("Get out of here, this is not your preschool"), evoking a teacher's (even if invented) statement to substantiate their action; second, as someone who is different from them culturally. With the girl having a strangely sounding name that the boys could neither comprehend nor pronounce (thus they never used it), belonging to an ethnic group different from their own (which, as a result of their limited knowledge, they could not precisely determine), the boys found themselves

uncomfortable while interacting with her. This seemed to be intensified by the manner in which she acted: while concentrated on her own activities, she was fully aware of what was happening around her (thus answering immediately the question about her name), but did not initiate any contact herself with the boys, keeping her distance. The boys' uneasiness could be easily sensed, and both their limited interactions with the girl and the violence that some of them eventually resorted to can be interpreted as their response to it.

Staunæs (2003: 104) employs the notion of "troubled subject positions" to talk about those positions in social and discursive practices that appear to be difficult as a result of a specific distribution of power. Certain ethnic categories can be such troubled positions, and the incident discussed sheds light on the construction of such a position on a preschool microlevel. Excluded from preschool membership – as a result, at least among other reasons, of her membership in a socially disadvantaged group[62] – Szakira is also rejected by children as a stranger, "an Other". By rejecting her, the boys simultaneously construct the preschool as a place that is rightly theirs, and position themselves as its guards. They establish a boundary between those who belong and those who do not, those who have certain privileges and those who are denied them and who therefore have to be excluded when they illegitimately attempt to gain them. They position themselves as the "First" (Staunæs 2003: 105): being in the right place, behaving in comprehensible ways, having certain rights, while positioning Szakira as the "Other": different, unintelligible, denied access.

Due to her double exclusion, Szakira's case was specific, yet the fact of not being a preschooler could itself prove an important resource for establishing power hierarchies. In the following section I will briefly discuss how children, drawing on the categories of age and preschool membership, positioned themselves as dominant.

## Age and membership intersecting

> There is also a younger boy, not from group 3, in the sandbox. At some point children start quarreling over toys. Pawel shouts that these are the preschool toys and everyone can play with them. The boy answers that these are his toys; they all shout for quite a while and other children get involved as well. Weronika shouts: "These are preschool toys, you little one!" and Pawel adds:

62 This itself points to a failure of educational authorities at the local and state level to ensure Roma children's access to educational institutions.

> "You little baby! Because we are the older ones, and you are little!" The boy gets up, approaches Pawel saying: "I'm bigger" and tries to hit him. In fact he is much smaller than Pawel. Pawel does not respond to this attack, but keeps on repeating: "These are our toys. Ours and that's it. Don't argue with the older ones. This is our preschool, you teeny-weeny." The boy keeps on repeating, now crying, that these are his toys and he is big. (Preschool A, 12.05.2006)

The preschool children position themselves here as privileged in a double sense: as those who attend the preschool (as opposed to the boy who only came to play on the preschool playground and, in fact, brought his own toys) and are older. In the kids' discourse the fact of being older suffices to grant them the position of authority, and in this way they construct a hierarchical structure based on age. This structure is enriched and strengthened as the category of age gets entangled with that of belonging. Thus, the boy is excluded and prevented from speaking both because he is younger ("Don't argue with the older ones") and because he is not one of them ("This is our preschool"). Just like Szakira, being the Other, a stranger, he is being positioned as having no right to be on the preschool playground, and if he happened to be there, he must submit to those who have a legitimate right to be there, and who are also an authority figure by virtue of their age.

Hierarchical orders constructed by the children themselves on the basis of categories such as age, gender, preschool membership, but also more temporary structures built on categories more specific to preschool life, seem to mirror the child-adult hierarchical order. Children have the ability to employ the same discursive instruments as used by their teachers to establish their own dominant position, such as telling the boy in the last excerpt not to argue with the older ones or simply forbidding others to act in a specific way. Yet, I am not arguing here for any causal relation that would entail a mere repetition by the children of teachers' practices, leading to the development of hierarchies that would be a simple reflection of the hierarchical age order in which children are positioned as subordinate and adults as dominant. I do claim, however, that the hierarchical order established in the course of interactions between children and adult teachers, and being a dimension of a hierarchical structure of the society at large, constituted a discursive horizon that influenced children's actions. Positioning oneself within a hierarchical order, which involved including and excluding others, was normalized in the preschool as an appropriate way of acting in relation to others, and children, as competent social actors, drew on their knowledge of its naturalness as a resource in their interactions.

# Summary

In the Foucaultian approach, power is perceived not as a property, but as a strategy; it is something that is being exercised or employed, rather than held. Yet, it is not something that is merely imposed on others; it is invested in them, transmitted through them, it turns them into subjects, and it is only through this subjection that they can resist it. Thus, power is not perceived as merely negative or repressive; instead, Foucault argues for a conception of power as productive.

In this chapter I demonstrated how preschool children were constructed as subjects through power relations in which they functioned. First, they were constructed as dependent and subordinate children who employed a whole range of means to respond to their subjection: from various forms of resistance (some of which reinforced the particular subject positions they occupied) to compliance. They were also constructed as subjects within the power structures that organized their relations with other children, trying to position themselves as dominant or to counterbalance others' attempts to take such dominant positions. Children are therefore free in the Foucaultian sense: they actively respond to the process of their subjection, resisting it and trying to establish their own subject positions. Still, they exercise this freedom as subjects constituted as inferior, subordinated and deprived of certain rights and opportunities in the hierarchical generational order. Their freedom rests on their attempts to question the inequality and subordination they experience in their daily lives.

# 9. Children's perspectives on their preschool lives

In the previous chapters I brought up several instances which demonstrated what children thought or how they felt about certain preschool situations, how they assessed their teachers' and other children's actions and behavior, and what they liked or disliked about their everyday lives in the preschool. It is clear that children do not merely accept adults' ideas, plans or decisions without giving them any thought. Quite the contrary; they evaluate them, sometimes question or challenge them, and sometimes criticize them or reject them outright. Yet, given the specific dynamics of child-adult power relations, not only are their views rarely taken into consideration, but the children themselves are often unwilling to openly reveal their dissatisfaction in front of their teachers. As I pointed out, one of the elements of the construction of a good child is a child's ability to obey adults without questioning their instructions. As a result, "good children" were effectively deprived of an opportunity to communicate their wishes and preferences to the teachers. They did it to other children as well as to me, given my special position at the preschool. In this chapter, drawing mostly on my conversations with children, I discuss their perception of their lives in the preschool: what they liked and disliked about it, and how they perceived their teachers' actions. While talking with the children, I invited them not only to tell me about their present experience of the preschool, but also to imagine how the preschool could be changed in order to make it a place they would enjoy.

Giving children the right to express their views on issues that affect them, and thus to participate fully in family, social and cultural life is one of the crucial rights secured by the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, ratified by Poland in 1991 and constituting a fundamental point of reference in both preschools where I conducted my research. Yet, although formally granted to the children, this right was rarely put in practice. The child-adult power relations was one reason; another was the fact that the preschools lacked structural arrangements that could enable the children to openly share their opinions on the preschool with the teachers and make their voices relevant. While teachers discussed a wide range of issues with the children, including their preferences, interests, likes and dislikes, those specific to preschool life were rarely a point of interest. As I mentioned in the

previous chapters, children were not given a chance to participate in planning the daily/weekly schedule or specific activities, and instances of asking them to evaluate activities or events they participated in were also infrequent. Thus, their views remained largely unexpressed. The objective of this chapter is to bring them to the fore. At the same time, it needs to be remembered that there might be some danger in reading children's opinions literally. What children said to me, or, for that matter, the fact that they shared their views with me at all, had to do with specific conditions that I managed to create as an non-authoritarian adult. So when children offered suggestions as to the organization of the preschool, it does not necessarily mean that the image of the place they presented to me was anything more than a momentary idea they invented when asked. Perhaps more important is the fact that our conversations demonstrated that children could reflect on their lives in the preschool and envision changes.

## Children's views on preschool

Throughout my research, I attempted to gain insight into the children's experience of their lives in the preschool. I initiated conversations with the children from the beginning of my project, and I discovered that they were fairly capable of explicitly communicating what they liked and disliked about their preschool as well as of putting forward ideas for change. Obviously, this skill became more honed as they grew older, more experienced and knowledgeable about preschool reality, and also more reflective and capable of verbally expressing their views. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, approaches such as the Mosaic approach emphasize the importance of using a whole range of methods in researching with children. While not systematically implementing any of the less typical methods included in that approach, I attempted to gain access to children's perceptions of their lives in the preschool using their drawings; I was also frequently taken on informal tours around the preschool or playground initiated by children who wanted to show me their favorite spots. Still, in getting to know their views on preschool reality, I relied mostly on my observations and conversations with children. Even though some researchers point to difficulties in interviewing children, I was quite successful at communicating with them. One reason for this could be that, as I have already mentioned, the children did not usually have much room for openly expressing their views, and our conversations presented them

with an opportunity to do so. Moreover, we usually talked outside the classroom and the possibility of staying away from the teachers, combined with a chance to play with my voice recorder and – in Preschool B – to sit or jump on mattresses stored in the room where we usually talked made the interview situation apparently attractive to children who were quite eager to talk to me. As a result, I was able to get to know their ideas about various aspects of the preschool world quite well. They will be discussed in the remainder of this section with a focus on two main themes: child-adult relations in the preschool and preschool organization.

## Questioning aspects of child-teacher relations

> Sometimes when I sleep I imagine such a nice preschool, where nobody shouts at us, all teachers are so nice, we can do everything and all is so great, so very great. (Alladynka, Preschool A, 21.06.2007)

As I discussed in previous chapters, child-teacher relations in the preschool were premised on the hierarchical distinction between adults and children which resulted in the construction of the former as those who are in power and rule, and the latter who are expected to subordinate. Children's subordinate status was one of their main points of reference in our conversations about their perception of the preschool. First, they spoke at length about their dislike of the fact that teachers shouted at them. In Preschool A, where shouting at children was very common, virtually all the kids I talked to mentioned it, but such comments were also made in Preschool B:

> Harry: We can't stand Ms Zosia.
> KG: Why, what's wrong with her?
> Harry: Because she shouts at us. When we haven't done anything wrong. (Preschool A, 16.02.2007)

> Mruczek: And what I don't like is that Ms Patrycja shouts. Everyone in the group doesn't like it. (Preschool B, 28.03.2007)

Children revealed that they felt sad and sorry when being shouted at. As Alladynka from Preschool A put it, "I feel so sad. As if someone was beating me and I would get sad," which points to the oppressive character of shouting. Interestingly, Preschool A children's attitude toward shouting changed as they grew older. While during the conversations we had in their

last year of the preschool they criticized their teachers for it, in their second year they seemed to perceive shouting as an obvious element of the preschool landscape. Asked about incidents when a teacher shouted at a child, they justified it by saying that the child misbehaved, did not like some food, etc. Rarely did they talk about their own feelings in relation to being shouted at and did not question the teachers' reasons for doing so. They appeared to naturalize shouting as an adult's response to children's "misbehavior." Their increased criticism as they grew older could be related both to their growing ability to verbally express their emotions, and to their knowledge of the preschool life, including the fact that teachers could shout at the children for no reason. Some of them seemed to be convinced that adults shout as a rule, and sometimes it has nothing to do with a child's specific behavior.

Alladynka's comment opening this section is a good indication of the impact that adults' shouting had on the children's experience of the preschool. Asked about a preschool she would like to attend, the girl first mentioned that teachers would not shout at children there. Alladynka's response is quite striking: the features of her "dream preschool" – nice teachers who do not shout – appear to be rather basic ones and her pointing to them as something she dreams of indicates the extent to which they were, in her experience, missing from her actual preschool.

Another feature of Alladynka's dream preschool – the possibility for children to do what they want to – was also frequently included in children's accounts. Children both pointed to a whole range of activities they liked, but which they were frequently forbidden to undertake, such as running in the building, jumping or screaming. They also indicated that the teachers controlled the way they carried out other activities that were allowed:

> Łatek: What I dislike the most is that the teacher doesn't let us to anything we want to do!
> Piotrek: Right.
> KG: What does that mean?
> Łatek: We can't be on the mattresses, we can't play on the computer when we want...
> Piotrek: We can't play on the computer all day long.
> Kuba: And lessons are too frequent.
> Piotrek: And too long.
> Kuba: Yes, they last too long, sometimes an hour. (Preschool B, 25.06.2007)

Teachers' control over the preschool life was experienced by the children as the teachers' straightforward dominance. Cornelia stated that she did not like

the fact that the teachers ruled over the children, as she put it; Filemonka complained about a teacher constantly giving orders. Children's statements clearly demonstrate their awareness and dislike of the existing power relations in which adults were the primary decision-makers in issues concerning children's daily lives. They responded to this not only by employing various resistance strategies, but also by elaborating ideas as to how child-teacher relations could be organized and what roles adults should play in preschool. First, they underscored the importance of the possibility to make choices. Filemonka, for instance, stated that she wished "that [the teacher] simply says: You can do this, perhaps not this, maybe yes, maybe not." She did not rule out the possibility of a teacher suggesting certain options to the children, she only wanted to have a chance to "choose a bit, a little bit," as she said. Other children went further, as demonstrated in a conversation I held with Taranee and Dorota from Preschool B:

> Taranee: And I wish there were no teachers in the preschool!
> KB: No teachers in the preschool? Children only?
> Taranee: Cool! It would be great, wouldn't it?
> Dorota: Yep, because we could walk on the mattresses.
> Taranee: And we could play alone.
> Dorota: Yeah, and we could go where we want.
> Taranee: But only in the preschool, because I wouldn't go outside on my own, because... Oh, and I wish there were no teachers here, but that the teachers guarded the preschool entrance.
> KG: So that nobody enters, right?
> Dorota: Thieves. So that nobody enters, because for instance if we go on the playground and someone comes to the playground, will it be nice if someone takes away all children? And a mom will be searching in all the nooks and crannies.
> Taranee: I also want it to be this way. Either so that there are no teachers, or there is one gymnastic teacher, one karate teacher, one for instance... For instance later on there is one lunch teacher...
> Dorota: For instance a dance teacher!
> Taranee: Yeah. One teacher. And the same with all of them. And the children will organize their play themselves. (Preschool B, 7.02.2007)

The construction of a dream preschool as free from teachers can be interpreted as an indication of restrictions and constraints the children associated with the adults. It points to their need to be agents: to have the possibility to decide themselves what to do, how to spend time, what activities to engage in and what to refrain from. This is also illustrated by another of Taranee's ideas: that teachers would offer certain activities and children could

choose those they are interested in. Again, this seems to be speaking to children's experiences of a limited agency and the necessity of conforming to adults' decisions, including adult-made schedules. As the girls' conversation reveals, children certainly wanted to have some control over the way in which their days were organized. They appreciated the teachers' ability to provide them with interesting ideas of how to spend their time, they wanted to draw on them, yet it seemed important to them that a final decision as to whether to participate or not was theirs.

Another important issue emerges from their conversation. Contrary to what the teachers claimed, the girls appeared to be quite aware of potential risks and dangers they could face, and they wanted the adults to function as guards who would protect them when needed. They sketched, therefore, an image of a children's preschool – a place organized according to children's needs and wishes, with teachers serving children rather than imposing their will on them. The children did not question the child-adult distinction; instead, they recognized the fact that adults, due to their age, experience and education, had certain abilities and skills which the children did not have, and which could make the kids' preschool lives better. They clearly wanted their teachers to support them, but they emphasized that "the children organize their play themselves."

Such statements are important as they reveal the children's perceptions of practices that constitute child-adult relations in the preschool. Talking about a preschool without teachers or where teachers' presence is marginal, the children explicitly express their unwillingness to accept the fact that they were deprived of decision-making power, as already illustrated by their resistance techniques. Yet, while children in both preschools talked about their wish to do whatever they wanted, it was mostly Preschool B kids who developed a vision of a preschool as a place without teachers or with teachers responding to children's requests, rather than imposing their will on them. Instead, Preschool A children concentrated on the teachers' specific features: apart from wanting their teachers to let them to what they wished, they dreamed of teachers who are "good to us and [do] not shout at us" or who address children in a kind manner. Thus, in our conversations they assessed their teachers as "silly" or "mean to the children," which they often exemplified by teachers' shouting. This does not necessarily imply, however, that children's own space and agency were less important for Preschool A children than they were for their peers from Preschool B. The fact that they put so much emphasis on specific aspects of teachers' attitudes toward them seems to be

rather a reflection of the prevalence of shouting and violence as common features of the adults' way of relating to children that the latter disliked. Preschool B children, who were less constrained and whose creativity was praised and stimulated, were more capable of envisioning a more radical change in their environment.

Yet, children also expressed their dissatisfaction with teachers' actions they considered unfair or inappropriate in specific situations. For instance, Harry and Niko from Preschool A recalled an incident in which one of the teachers forbade them to intervene when Harcon attacked their friends, claiming that it was "none of [their] business." Commenting on the teacher's instruction, Niko said: "This is what she said because I was meddling with their business, because I had to help them because they are my best friends. And the teacher went: Don't meddle with somebody else's business! This teacher is a bit abnormal too" (Preschool A, 16.02.2007). Niko is critical about the teacher's action of preventing him from doing what he recognized as his moral obligation: supporting and defending his friends when they were in trouble. Given the emphasis put in the preschool on helping each other, it is not surprising that Niko found the teacher's instruction rather incomprehensible. Children were also quite sensitive to what they considered teachers' injustice, mostly the fact that some children were allowed to, or were given more chances to do things that others were not. They also claimed that the teachers – to their dissatisfaction – let some children speak or chose some of them to carry out a specific, highly desired, task more often than others. Although I do not have data systematic enough to state whether or not this was indeed the case, such statements reveal children's sensitivity to what they perceived as the teachers' preferential treatment of kids and their disapproval of such practices.

## Questioning aspects of relations with other children

Another issue often raised in children's accounts was their relationships with other children. While one of the main reasons why the kids enjoyed coming to the preschool was that they could meet and play with their friends, other children's misbehavior was a frequent source of their dissatisfaction with the preschool. For instance, asked what she disliked about the preschool, Weronika explained:

> Weronika: I don't like it when someone misbehaves.
> KG: And what do they do then?

> Weronika: They fight. Fight. Do something wrong.
> KG: Like what?
> Weronika: They fight. They kick. And it's not good to laugh at someone, is it?
> KG: Not quite...
> Weronika: Sebastian was laughing at me today. And I only fell by accident, and he was laughing at me. (Preschool A, 21.02.2007)

Acts such as fighting, damaging other kids' work, taking toys away from others were mentioned among things that children disliked the most, and that caused their dissatisfaction with the preschool. Significantly, when imagining her ideal preschool, Piękna said that she wanted it to be good for the children, which meant that "nobody fights, pinches, pulls someone else's hair, and everyone lends toys to the others" (Preschool A, 21.06.2007). Peaceful, friendly relationships with their peers were as important for the children as those with the teachers. As a result, Preschool A children would often point to Harcon as the one whom they did not like for his disruptive behavior, while Preschool B used Robert for that purpose. While, understandably, the kids might have genuinely preferred to be on good terms with others, it also has be to remembered that both Harcon and Robert were easy targets. By complaining about their behavior, the children could be reproducing the teachers' stigmatization practices.

Another important aspect of relations among children were the inclusion/exclusion practices. The significance of being friends with others is clearly demonstrated by the fact that Leila's immediate response to the question concerning what she liked about the preschool was "I have friends." While the problem of exclusion concerned mostly younger kids who were frequently refused access to groups consisting of the older kids, several children often talked bitterly about not being allowed to play with some other kids. Refusal to accept a child as a member of a play group was one of the major triggers for conflicts and resentment in both preschools, and in our conversations children often referred to their desire to be included. The inclusion/exclusion processes usually worked on the basis of age, gender or experience in being a preschooler, and they can be considered a form of power operation. Children's dissatisfaction with them can therefore be interpreted as an attempt to question and destabilize the hierarchical structures of dominance and subordination established in the course of children's interactions.

## Questioning preschool organization

The previous sections dealt with the children's perception of some aspects of teacher-child and child-child relations. However, the children also commented on the organization of preschool life in general. They pointed to specific problems they perceived and offered solutions to them. Strikingly, what their comments reveal is that preschools often failed to meet their needs although both institutions claimed that satisfying children's needs was one of their main objectives.

Asked what they enjoyed about their preschool, children in both places mentioned first the possibility to play with their friends. Consequently, what many of them found problematic were restrictions on their play: the fact that they could not play as long as they wanted, or in ways they found attractive (e.g. running), or in specific places; some also pointed out that there was too much learning and not enough time to play. A very vivid conversation between Brietta and Krzysiu, asked what they would like to do in preschool, is a good illustration of this issue:

- So that we could only play.
- And what I would like is that we could do nothing, only just sit and play.
- And I would like us to be able to go out when we want.
- And stay on the playground for 5 hours.
- And throw away all the books, and off we go to play!
- And so that we could stay here until midnight.
- And we do what we want. (Preschool B, 28.03.2007)

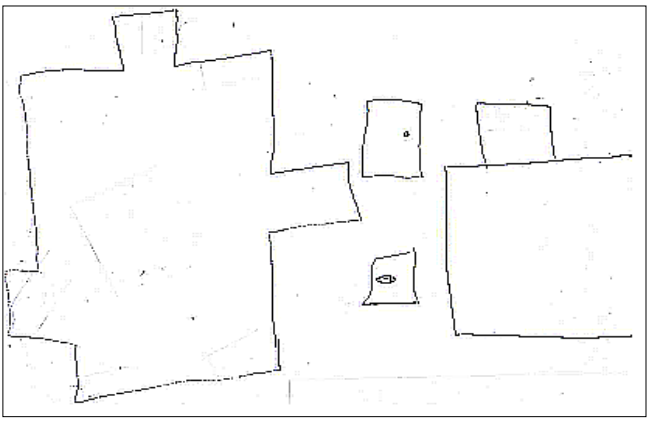
The emphasis so many children put on play may be related to the number of organized activities they participated in every day. Besides regular learning activities (such as reading, writing, math, elements of natural sciences) carried our by their group teachers, many children in both preschools also attended English lessons, gymnastics, religion lessons, chess practice, theater, dance or art workshops, as well as various performances, concerts, etc. A highly structured schedule left relatively little room for children's own, self-initiated play. At the same time, however, many children claimed that they enjoyed learning tasks a lot and some wanted to study more, like Cornelia who wished to practice writing whole words and sentences rather than just letters, and to have "English twice a day and work with handbooks everyday, twice a day." What this diversity of views seems to indicate is a limited flexibility of the preschool in providing children with activities that would fit their preferences and needs, or rather in ensuring space for children to pursue their own

interests[63]. This could again result from highly structured schedules premised on the principle of all children being involved in the same activity, which, combined with a high child/teacher ratio, rendered it quite difficult for the teachers to respond to specific children's needs.

Structural arrangements in the preschool were a frequent point of reference in the children's accounts. First, the architecture. As Piękna mentioned, children could not play catching games in the preschool building, while they could play hide-and-seek. Yet, as she observed, "there are hardly any places to hide. Only on the playground" (Preschool A, 23.04.2007). The principle of such a space arrangement so as to prevent children from getting away from the teacher's gaze made it impossible for the kids to successfully carry out an activity that was theoretically allowed.

When imagining their ideal preschools, the children drew both on architectural constraints they encountered in their daily lives in the institution and on their interests and preferences. Thus, a recurring idea was a large space to play in (picture 1):

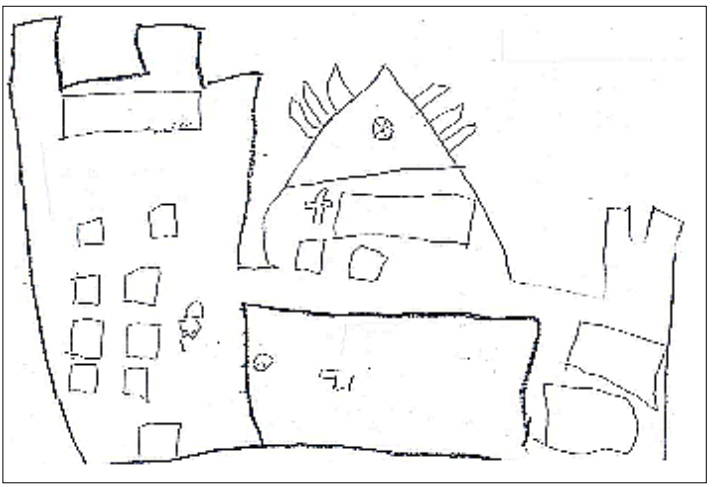
> I would like an empty preschool. Then we could run in it. An empty preschool so that we could run. (Dorota, Preschool B, 7.02.2007)



*Picture 1. Empty preschool, so that there is space to run*

63 I am not arguing here for such a model of preschool care that would result in children spending all the time playing, if this is what they say they want. Acquiring knowledge or certain skills, such as reading, writing, calculating or using some English, was a source of children's great satisfaction and pleasure. Nonetheless, a sense of insufficient play time clearly emerges from the children's accounts.

The children's desire for an architectural arrangement that would enable them to pursue their interests was also visible in their including elements such as football fields, a swimming pool or towers ("so that we have a lot to climb up on" and also to observe "who to attack, who is good and who is bad," as Maks explained) in their drawings (picture 2). While such projects were rather extravagant, some of the kids' ideas were more modest while they still indicated what the children considered drawbacks of their preschools. Subaru, for instance, wished to have a new bathroom in the preschool because, as he said, those they had at the moment stank. Ania imagined a preschool with a kennel at the entrance and a dog to play with.



*Picture 2. Preschool with a swimming pool and a tower to climb*

Furthermore, children talked a lot about the way in which their days in preschool were organized. Cornelia's comment is very instructive in this respect:

> What I don't like in the preschool is that we can't take a nap if we want. What I also dislike is that we can't, for instance, play an instrument, that we can't go to the playground every day when it's not raining, and that we can't have the lunch that we want. (Preschool B, 8.04.2007)

The possibility of taking a nap when a child feels tired was one of the recurring themes in children's accounts. Problematic in the first and the

second groups, when it was obligatory and quite disliked by at least some children, it could prove an interesting option for older kids whose daily schedule, however, did not include nap time. Exhausted from strenuous activities or play, they wished to have a chance to lie down for a while and rest. What this issue reveals is, again, the preschool's limited flexibility in responding to some of the children's needs. Driven by a discourse that related needs such as taking a nap to specific age groups, the preschools failed to respond to the needs of actual, individual children[64].

Cornelia mentions another issue that was frequently discussed by children, namely food. In both preschools meals were organized in such a way that, in most cases, children were served plates with their servings already on them. Even though, as the Preschool B principal claimed, they could leave what they did not want to eat – in her words, "it is by the rule of elimination, [the child] simply throws away what [he or she] does not want, and does not eat it" – in practice children were often warned that they had to eat everything or at least the teachers insisted on them eating just a bit more. In our conversations, children, in particular from Preschool B, often developed complete plans of handling meals in a way they found more appropriate, as Taranee did in this example:

> What I would like is that there is a lunch, potatoes, salad, meat, as usual, and a cook has everything divided, salad in one bowl, for instance potatoes in the other, and meat in the third, and everyone chooses what they will eat for sure. And for instance: Can I have this salad and potatoes, and the cook gives it to me, but without meat, when somebody doesn't want meat and won't eat it, then they won't. Or something else. Because now, when we already have everything served on our plates, there are problems later: But I don't want this, I don't, I don't want this! And now, yes, I want the salad and something else and something else, but you see, I don't like this salad. (Preschool B, 9.02.2007)

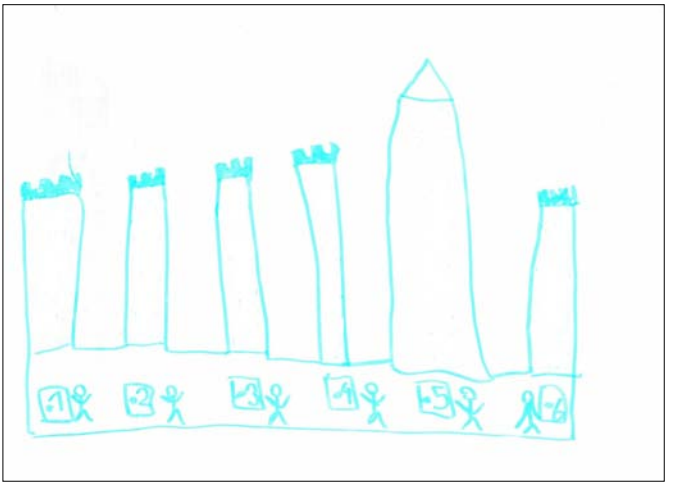
Most of the preschool staff found such an arrangement entirely unacceptable, pointing to nutrition norms the institution had to abide by and practical difficulties related to providing children with a selection of food. Yet, although some kids indeed fantasized about having ice cream for every meal or eating spaghetti every day, it seems that what they were mainly concerned

64 It needs to be mentioned that some children who did not need to take a nap were, especially in Preschool B, exempted from it. Yet, neither preschool provided a possibility for older children to take a nap when they were tired, for instance by arranging a space with mattresses and blankets where children could go and lie down if they wanted to, although some plans of doing so were being made.

with was – as Taranee explains – merely the possibility of deciding what to eat and how much out of what is offered on a given day. The focus again is on children's attempts (or desire) to be agents, having some say in issues that concern them.

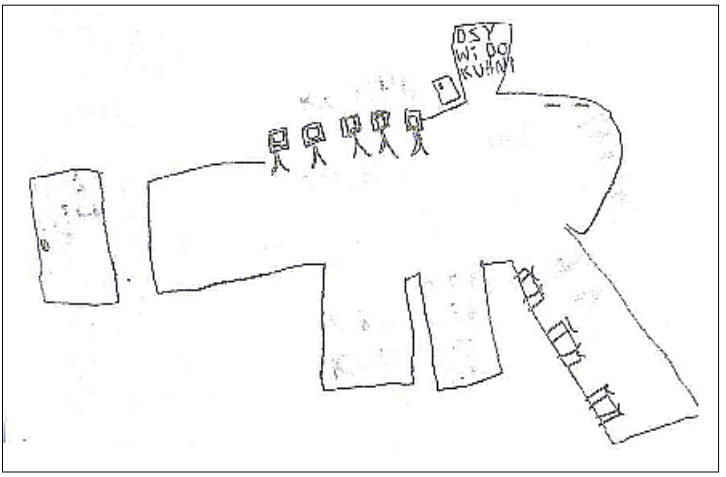
Another recurring theme was the children's desire for private spaces. It meant, first, having the possibility to play uninterrupted by other kids – something quite luxurious in a group of 25 children gathered in a rather small room. The most striking idea was developed by Maks from Preschool A, who wanted a single-person preschool only for himself and who explained that he did not want anyone to interfere with his play. There could be various interpretations of such a desire, from the child's egocentrism to it being a response to structural constraints resulting in the necessity to constantly be in the company of many other children and to compete for limited resources. In a similar vein, it could be linked to the lack of children's personal space that nobody else would have access to.

Personal space also meant getting free from the teachers' gaze. While the need for privacy was already visible in children's practices discussed earlier (such as hiding under a table), it was strikingly present in their ideas concerning the organization of a perfect preschool. Maks from Preschool A, for instance, said that he "would like everyone to be invisible, even me!" Asked for the reason, he explained: "Because then the teacher will not see what we are doing."



*Picture 3. Preschool as a system of towers for individual children.*

Taranee from Preschool B went even further and imagined a model preschool designed as a system of individual towers for single children (picture 3). Each child would have his or her own set of toys placed in theme corners (a corner with building blocks, dolls, a house corner), a few computers (for different types of activities; this can be interpreted as a response to the constant fights over access to the computer in Preschool B), a bed so that a child can take a nap if he or she feels tired, and a private bathroom (picture 4). Children would usually play and eat on their own, yet she also developed a very complex system of communication to enable children to get in touch and arrange a common play. Children would have sets of cards with the number of their tower and would pass one, via a teacher, to a child they would like to play with. The teachers, besides being such intermediaries, would also serve as guards, letting invited children enter a given child's tower and protecting children from strangers. Moreover, the teachers would find out what children want to eat for breakfast and lunch, and ensure they get their selection of food. They would also visit individual children at a specific time and carry out an activity a given child has chosen or would bring their meals. Yet, they would have no access to the towers at other times and without a child's permission.




*Picture 4. Inside the tower: blocks, dolls corner, the piano, computers*

How can such ideas be interpreted? Read in light of the specific organization of the preschools that I discussed in the previous chapters, they could be seen as children's comment on the surveillance they experienced on a daily basis. It is difficult not to relate their wish to be invisible or to spend time in a lonely

tower, away from anyone's sight, to nearly constant supervision and crowdedness. What also emerges from Taranee's design is a vision of the preschool as a highly structured place (with elements such as children assigned to specific towers, the use of cards and teachers as guards) inhabited by children as isolated individuals. The high degree of structuring is not surprising – functioning in a structured environment, the child can be seen as using the same framework for her invention. The isolation that Taranee talked about is more problematic. Children appreciated each other's company and the possibility to play with their peers was important for them, so the idea of placing children in separate towers is surprising. This might therefore be one of the instances where reading a child's statement literally is questionable. However, Taranee's ideas can still be taken as a powerful indication of the girl's ability to pinpoint and reflect on some of the basic features of preschool organization.

In general, the significance most of the children attached to the possibility of doing what one wants (carrying out activities one wants, eating what one wants or taking a nap when one feels tired) could be interpreted as pointing to the children's lack of choice in matters that concerned them daily. Children, who were constantly told what to do and when, and who were always subject to the adults' gaze, clearly called for more personal space, autonomy and decision-making power.

## Ambiguities of the notion of responding to a child's needs

If children's visions were to be followed, it would appear that the crucial issue would be to pay more attention to the principle of treating children as individuals and responding to their needs, and to construct early childhood educational institutions in a way that would enable children to decide to a greater extent about what to do, when and how. But the call for responding to children's needs in not without problems. In her powerful deconstructive analysis of child-centered education, of which the notion of the orientation toward children's interests and needs is an integral part, Burman (2008) points to a number of questions and dilemmas posed by such an approach. As she recaps, child-centered approaches are based on five principles: a child's readiness to learn, choice (giving children the possibility to determine when and what to learn), a child's needs (that should be satisfied in order to prevent

a child from having problems later), play (which conveys the idea of work/learning as voluntary and pleasurable, and highlights the role of play in ensuring freedom and independence) and discovery (which points to the need for learning to happen through personal experience) (*ibid.*: 263). Burman demonstrates how all these principles, while seemingly progressive, entail specific problems. She observes that approaches based on these principles tend to privilege middle-class children who are more "ready" than working-class children and have the skills necessary for learning. The focus on individual children results in abstracting them from their social context and downplaying class and other distinctions, and, in the long run, "perpetuates rather than challenges social inequalities" (*ibid.*: 266). She also points out that even though child-centered education emphasizes children's autonomy and choice, its covert outcome is obedience. The implicit assumption of this approach is that children will be more willing to comply with regulations if they feel they have been given sufficient input in creating them (*ibid.*: 269). Such a conviction, although not expressed explicitly, could lay behind Preschool A teachers' attempts to develop rules or agreements concerning proper behavior together with the children (see Chapter 7). Burman, however, takes this point further and maintains that the child-centered education is based on the idea of a child as "an aggressive and primitive being" (*ibid.*: 274). Thus the strong, albeit hidden, preoccupation with control:

> Notwithstanding the cultural value placed on freedom, it becomes clear that the child-centered pedagogy is just as coercive as traditional approaches but in more subtle ways, and that underlying the model of the romantic, natural, innocent child lies an image of children as destructive, asocial and therefore threatening to the social order.
>
> (Burman 2008: 269)

Burman demonstrates that, like any other approach, child-centered education works to construct children as particular subjects, in this case, as self-disciplining, self-governing citizens. The control, instead of being openly imposed on children, becomes an integral part of their own actions as children govern themselves. In this way power appears invisible, which only enhances its efficiency.

Significantly, some of the tensions that Burman highlights can already be identified in Taranee's and other children's fantasies about the ideal preschool. The individualization of preschool organization in the girl's vision – a separate tower for each child, children's entirely individual decisions about their activities, very little spontaneous interaction and collaboration – is the most

striking element. On a more general plane, it is worth noting that visions in which children's individual choices (in relation to food, activities, or time structure) are brought to the forefront, originated in a rather middle-class preschool. Preschool B kids, often an only child in their families, might have been already well practiced in having others pay attention to their needs and respond to their interests (thus, for instance, the popularity of extracurricular, after-preschool activities), as well as in acting (playing) on their own. Burman's point about the greater compatibility of child-centered approaches with middle-class children finds its full substantiation in Taranee's project.

Pedagogical approaches, organization of educational institutions and models of a child developed in them are inextricably linked. Putting some of the children's ideas in practice would therefore imply different ways of power operation and different constructions of a child. As I have demonstrated, educational practices that consist in giving children choice, acting on what gets defined as their interests and needs or cherishing their independence, are not necessarily as benevolent as they appear to be. My conversations with children seem to indicate that such practices are closer to what some of the children would see as desirable ways of acting in the preschool context, yet their ambiguity is worth remembering.

## Whose preschool?

As the previous section demonstrated, the notion of needs in a preschool context is rather problematic. On the one hand, my conversations with children revealed that their preschools often failed to respond to what the kids presented as their needs, preferences or desires, from physical needs, for instance to sleep or drink, to emotional needs having to do with intimacy or autonomy. This failure could lead to children's experience of oppression and injustice. From this perspective, it could be claimed that preschools should take children's needs more seriously. At the same time, however, Burman's critique of child-centered pedagogy that accentuates the notion of responding to children's needs highlights the dilemmas and ambiguities of such an approach. With all the uncertainties about the practical application of the concept of meeting a child's needs in mind, in this section I look at how the preschools undertook it.

The image of the preschool that emerges from my conversations with children resembles what Rasmussen (2004) calls "places for children," created

for children by adults on the basis of adults' ideas about children. Places for children, Rasmussen observes, are not necessarily identical with "children's places," i.e., places that children themselves find meaningful to them, and, moreover, "children and their bodies tacitly point out that they need different places than those adults create for them" (*ibid.*: 161). Getting to know and satisfying children's needs was not an explicit theme in documents regulating the organization of the preschools studied, such as bylaws (on the preschool level), a local Law on Education (on the municipality level) or the Preschool Core Curriculum (on the national level). Still, it could be argued that a kind of child-orientation was at least an aspect of the intended preschool practice. A Preschool A bylaw talked about the child's right to "develop its interests and abilities" while that of Preschool B emphasized that the "teacher's role is not to assess, correct or criticize the child, but to organize, encourage and support children's activities and the pursuit of their goals. It is the child, not the curriculum, that determines the teacher's direction in their work. The teacher is a 'facilitator' in acquiring knowledge, not its 'provider'." The Core Curriculum underscored objectives such as "supporting a child's independent actions" or "enabling a child to make choices and to experience the positive effects of one's own actions." Finally, the local Law on Education pointed to "recognizing children's and youth's subjectivity in the education process along with getting to know their abilities, needs and preferences as a precondition for fulfilling the objectives of the education system."

Yet, the understanding of needs underlying these regulations is clearly developmental. When characterizing developmental psychology as one of the predominant discourses organizing early childhood education, Dahlberg and Moss (2005: 7) state: "Scientifically guided principles, based on generalizations that are considered sufficiently reliable, indicate the continuing efforts to find a universal and scientific guide for 'who' the child is and how to govern his or her progress and development." Significantly in the context of this claim, the Core Curriculum lists "supporting and directing the child in line with its inborn potential and developmental abilities" as one of the preschool objectives, and obliges preschools to assist parents in "recognizing the child's developmental abilities." This translates, on a more local level of the Preschool A bylaw, into the obligation to collaborate with parents "for the purpose of getting to know their children's developmental needs." The basis for such an approach is a conviction that there are specific needs typical of children of a certain age that can be discovered and which preschool practices should respond to.

Developmental framework, however, is an instance of Foucaultian "regime of truth": a system of beliefs and procedures used to construct the norm and the normal, and therefore to govern people's behavior and thinking (cf. Mac Naughton 2005: 32). As such, it works to exclude certain ways of acting or being; it "silences alternative truths, marginalizes diversity and reduces it to abnormality" (*ibid.*: 37). To draw on such framework is an attempt to establish the truth about children: to determine the model of who a child is/should be and how it should be treated. It is an attempt to normalize the child, for instance in ways demonstrated in the previous chapters. Establishing the truth about children also means specifically that certain children's needs will be taken into consideration while others will be disregarded. Furthermore, in line with Burman's (2008) criticism of the notions of readiness and needs, discussed in the previous part, the official documents construct a model of an entrepreneurial, independent and resourceful child who needs to be supported rather than closely directed – a middle-class, privileged child[65].

Mac Naughton (*ibid.*: 50) distinguishes between the truth about children and critically informed knowledge about them. This distinction is useful in reflecting on the documents regulating preschool work and preschool practice itself. The notion that it is possible to recognize a child's developmental needs and abilities, present in the Core Curriculum and the preschools' bylaws, is based on the assumption that there exist identifiable clear-cut, age-related stages through which children move. Yet, as Mac Naughton (*ibid.*: 36-37) observes, there is no single universal pattern of development that all children fit and, as a result, children who fail to meet the developmental standards are excluded. In this context an attempt to critically acquire informed knowledge about children may involve trying to find out what they themselves perceive as their needs or interests: by observing them and documenting their work rather than making assumptions about their behavior, by talking to them or utilizing any other method of researching with children.

It is quite significant that apart from the vague statement made in the local Law on Education concerning the need to recognize children's subjectivity, none of the documents referred to children as subjects/agents, who should be consulted and have the right to communicate their needs and

65 Again, it is not surprising in this context that references to the teacher's role as a facilitator rather than a provider of knowledge or to the need to support a child rather than assess him or her appeared in Preschool B, and not Preschool A, documents.

have them acknowledged. The underlying assumption seems to be that adults – teachers in educational institutions and parents – are capable of determining themselves what children need and involving children in the process is therefore unnecessary. This can be interpreted as an attempt to establish the truth about children rather than acquiring knowledge about them. While Ms Agnieszka from Preschool B underscored that she always began working with new children by observing them in order to get to know what they were like, what their interests, preferences, likes and dislikes were, it was obvious that there were aspects of children's lives that none of the teachers knew about. Given my special relationship with the children, I had access to some of these dimensions. Some teachers were quite interested in learning about children's views and opinions on certain preschool matters from me, as they were aware of the fact that the children, mostly out of fear, would not communicate them directly to the teachers. What this means, however, is that the children, incapable of expressing their views, did not have the sense of having any impact on what was happening in the institution. This was already illustrated by their claim that teachers ruled, but it became very striking in the following short conversation that ensued in the course of one interview in Preschool A:

> Ben: But can the preschool change?
> KG: I don't know; what do you think?
> Ben, Maks: No!
> KG: And if you told the teachers what *you* would like the preschool to be like, could something change? Would the teachers listen to you or not?
> Ben: No. (Preschool A, 20.02.2007)

The boys are rather doubtful about the possibility that children's voices would be heard by the teachers and that their ideas would be taken into consideration. They clearly did not perceive themselves as agents in Mayall's sense: as those who can undertake "negotiation with others, with the effect that the interaction makes a difference – to a relationship or to a decision, to the workings of a set of social assumptions or constraints" (Mayall 2002: 21). By not being asked about their views and afraid to take the initiative to communicate them, the children could not possibly sense that it was possible for them to influence what happened in the preschool. A question can be posed then as to who the preschool belongs to. Is the preschool indeed children's if they do not feel capable of having their voices heard, let alone make a difference?

The distinction that Moss and Petrie (2002) make between children's services and children's spaces appears quite useful in this context. As they say, in children's services:

> The child is poor, weak and needy. She needs to be made less so through becoming the subject of processes and methods which will regulate, protect, normalize, shape, develop, prevent, supervise – and which do so to ends that must always be predetermined and calculable, and which entail controlling the present for the sake of determining the future.
>
> (*ibid.*: 62)

Children's services are first and foremost instrumental: they are established for specific purposes defined mostly by adults; they fit adults' needs (e.g. those of working parents) and aim at producing proper adults. As such, they "are not provided as places for children to live their childhoods and to develop their culture" (*ibid.*: 63). To this, Moss and Petrie oppose what they term children's spaces. These are spaces:

> Provided through public agency, places for civic life rather than commercial transactions, where children meet one another, and adults. ... They are spaces for children's own agendas, although not precluding adult agendas, where children are understood as fellow citizens with rights, participating members of the social groups in which they find themselves, agents of their own lives, but also interdependent with others, co-constructors of knowledge, identity and culture, children who exist in the society on the basis of who they are, rather than who they will become.
>
> (*ibid.*: 106)

The image of the preschool as it emerges from my observations and children's comments fits the children's services model rather than that of children's spaces. The fact that to a large extent adults organized preschool life (in terms of setting goals, planning agendas and directing activities) makes it quite unlikely that the institutions could function as spaces where children would be agents. At the same time, it could be argued that what the children themselves were pointing to as their dream preschool was much closer to the children's spaces model. The children clearly wanted a place which they could shape: where they would have a say as far as both their activities and the architecture of the place are concerned, and where their needs would be taken into consideration. It would also be a place where they could express their views freely and have them heard. Putting aside the warnings that Burman (2008) and other researchers working in a similar tradition express, a question arises then as to how the preschool practice could be reorganized so as to

approximate the ideal of a "children's preschool." Researchers often turn to the example of childcare provision in the Italian city of Reggio Emilia for inspiration. Characteristic of it is the notion of a rich or intelligent child:

> Our image of children no longer considers them as isolated and egocentric, does not see them only engaged in action with objects, does not emphasize only the cognitive aspects, does not belittle feelings or what is not logical and does not consider with ambiguity the role of the affective domain. Instead our image of the child is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and, most of all, connected to adults and other children.
>
> (Malaguzzi, 1993: 10, quoted in Moss, Dillon and Statham 2000: 250)

Such a notion of the child, like any other discursive construct, is productive of social practice. In the Reggio Emilia case, it translates into "pedagogy of listening" – a practice devoted to making meaning of what the other says, in a number of different languages; practice that is open to and respectful of otherness. Importantly, pedagogy of listening perceives relationships as crucial to learning (constructing meaning), rather than looking at children as individuals detached from others (Dahlberg and Moss 2005: 100, Moss, Dillon and Statham 2000: 249). Moreover, significantly in the context of the ambiguity of the notion of responding to a child's needs, the Reggio Emilia approach shifts from the idea of children as subject to needs to children as subject to rights (Moss, Dillon and Statham 2000: 251). This could help avoid the normalizing and exclusionary practices that, as critics of the developmental psychology demonstrate, the discourse of needs brings about[66].

Pedagogy of listening, as conceived of in the Reggio Emilia model, can therefore open up a way toward taking children's ideas seriously without simultaneously resulting in even stronger and more efficient control and coercion. As Dahlberg and Moss say:

> In a 'real' listening to the child, in a welcoming and an encounter ... something incalculable comes on the scene. What children say surprises us, and helps us to interrupt predetermined meanings and totalising practices, totalising practices such as the concepts and classifications of developmental psychology which give us as teachers or researchers possibilities to possess and 'comprehend' the child. Doing this one realises that what the child has got

66 It needs to be mentioned, however, that the notion of rights is not unproblematic either. Rights are embedded in legal and liberal discourses and they build on the notion of a rational, autonomous individual. They can preclude practices that are more relational and contextualized (Dahlberg and Moss 2005: 30-31).

> to say has often been excluded, marginalised, ignored or just been seen as something cute or funny. Listening can make us both surprised and shocked as we find out how rich and intelligent children's thoughts are.
>
> (Dahlberg and Moss 2005: 101)

## Summary

In this chapter I attempted to outline children's ideas regarding their preschools: what they liked and disliked about them, and what change they envisioned. My conversations with children revealed that, as my observational material had already indicated, children were unhappy about their teachers' dominance (be it shouting at children or directing them) and their own limited scope of independence and privacy. The issue of having the right to decide on matters that concerned them – what to eat, how and when to play, what activities to take part in – systematically emerged, especially in Preschool B. The analysis of children's comments on their daily lives in the preschool and their ideas for change could lead to a conclusion that what preschools need is to engage more thoroughly with the notion of children's rights.

However, drawing on critics of child-centered education and developmental psychology, I discussed the ambiguities and dilemmas that ensue from attempts to act in line with children's needs and interests. In a (pre)school context, the discourse of children's needs and interests may work to privilege middle-class children at the expense of more disadvantaged ones. Further, when children's needs are approached from a developmental perspective, a danger appears that attempts to recognize and follow them could result in normalizing certain needs (and children who display them) and excluding others. Granting children the right to act on their interests and creating space for them to be agents can in turn open up the field of self-governance, which, in the Foucaultian perspective, entails even more efficient and all-encompassing control. A possible solution to – or at least an inspiration as to how to handle – the dilemmas of responding to children's needs and interests and constructing them as agents can be the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education where children, considered rich and intelligent, collaborate with adults to create meaning.

# 10. "If you do it everyday, it is terrible." Teachers' work from their perspective and in the institutional context

This chapter is, in part, an attempt to discuss preschool life from the perspective of the teachers. In the analysis carried out in the preceding chapters I pointed to their role in determining the shape of preschool life and structuring children's experience. However, as indicated in Chapter 8, the teachers' dominance was not unquestionable. Power relations in preschools are dynamic and often the teachers found themselves powerless. This frequently resulted from structural arrangements: the way the preschool institution was organized, what resources were available to the teachers, or what duties and obligations they faced. My aim in this chapter is to reconstruct the circumstances under which the teachers worked and which contributed to their feeling of powerlessness. I look at the material conditions of their work and at its discursive aspects, such as the teachers' own perception of their job. I demonstrate how their views fit in with a broader understanding of the teacher's role, as framed in particular by the preschool principals and parents. I also argue that difficulties the teachers experienced, and their feeling of powerlessness related to them, can be in part attributed to the process of change that has been taking place in preschool education and within the childcare context. New ways of relating to children, new understandings (and constructions) of the child, new expectations toward preschools and preschool teachers may undermine teachers' confidence in their own ability to act as proper, competent teachers and to render them insecure and vulnerable. Accustomed to certain ways of being a preschool teacher, they may not be able to successfully adapt to new challenges. "Sticking to the old ways" – understood broadly not only as employing traditional teaching methods mentioned by the Preschool A principal, but also as proceeding with well-known and long-used ways of interacting with children and constructing structures based on specific positions of the child and the adult – could therefore be perceived as a defense mechanism against their uncertainty.

The attempt to contextualize the teachers' actions and decisions by focusing on the circumstances under which they worked is important for two reasons. First, the ways the teachers in each of the preschools acted and related to the children differed, and the analysis of structural and ideological dimensions of their work may offer an insight into these differences. Second, some of the actions, in particular of Preschool A teachers, presented in the preceding chapters may appear troublesome. Anger, impatience or resorting to drastic means of imposing one's will on children are questionable aspects of a teacher's behavior. In this chapter I demonstrate that, while still unacceptable, such reactions are explicable, and to some extent can be attributed to structural and discursive factors that organize preschool life.

My approach in this chapter is twofold. Besides giving voice to the teachers through presenting their views on preschool life, I also, as an outside observer, reflect critically on what the teachers did and what they seemed to want to achieve. In this way, I try to reconstruct discourses that organized everyday preschool practice. Discourses may remain invisible to the teachers, yet they constitute the boundaries of what can be thought and done, and in this way regulate teachers' actions. Among them are discourses of a proper, "dream" preschool characterized by a strictly defined order, of a teacher as an authority figure who organizes children's work and is praised by them and their parents for that, or a very strong and influential safety discourse. All these contribute to the construction of the "truth" of the preschool. As Foucault claims, truth is not objective reality, but what gets established and accepted as true in a particular context:

> Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.
>
> Foucault (1980: 131)

In an attempt to reconstruct the preschools' regimes of truth that influenced the teachers' actions, I follow Gore's (1993) suggestion that regimes of truth operate and can be analyzed on a local, micro level as much as on a broad, societal level. The analysis carried out in the preceding chapters makes it clear that preschools are sites that have their own identifiable dominant discourses that produce their truths. Preschool regimes of truth both, to an extent, mirror broader societal discourses on child, adult, education and care, and are

specific to a given place as they are constituted by views, experiences and convictions of people in a particular location. Analyzing them is both possible and necessary for understanding what takes place in the preschools. It also enables making links between the teachers' own beliefs and the institutional regimes of truth, and therefore deindividualizing the teachers' actions.

# Material-structural conditions of a teacher's work

> I am in the staff room, getting ready to leave. Two aides are sitting there; one of them says that I have a pretty good job, just observing from the side, and the worst thing is to be a teacher. (Preschool A, 12.05.2006)

A recurring theme in the teachers' narrative was that a preschool teacher's occupation is hard and demanding. While all the teachers, having years of experience and a deep knowledge of preschool reality, talked about their job satisfaction, they could also easily point to difficulties and challenges they faced on a daily basis. Some of the difficulties were shared by teachers from both preschools, which may suggest that they were structural features rather than individual impressions. Others appeared only in the accounts of teachers working in one of the institutions, which points to differences between them and may help explain specificities of the teachers' behavior in each preschool.

## Organizational factors

Preschools in Poland are organized according to state-level laws, including the Law on the System of Education, as well as municipal regulations. Important in this context, the regulations determine aspects such as the size of a preschool (at least three groups) and the maximum group size (25). In order to limit their expenditure, local governments attempt to retain the maximum group size in preschools. This means, on the one hand, reorganizing the so-called "preschool network," i.e., closing down preschools with lower attendance rates, and, on the other, practically ruling out the possibility of decreasing the group size. As a result, one of the main problems the teachers faced was working with groups that, in their judgement, were too numerous. Ms Agnieszka explained it clearly:

> Groups should be smaller. The optimal number would be 16 or maybe 18. Then you can still have an overview of it, you can spend some time with each child, you can work with them individually, there is not much noise, there is no chaos. (Ms Agnieszka, Preschool B, interview 2007)

Reflecting on her work, she observed that her behavior would change significantly concurrent with changes in the group size. As she claimed, she was more relaxed, calmer and less prone to become irritated when the number of children was lower. The issue of group size is related to another problematic aspect of the preschool organization, i.e., the spatial constraints. Both preschools were located in buildings that were not originally designed for this purpose. In Preschool A this meant that most of the rooms were too small, which often resulted in crowdedness and noise.

Another important aspect was the teacher-child ratio. Most of the time only one teacher worked with the group of 25 children, occasionally supported by an aide responsible for helping out during meals and cleaning. In the teachers' view, this was not sufficient. They either claimed that the aide should be involved more in the group life, or that more teachers should work at the same time, offering different activities to children who would like to participate in them[67]. While such a solution would give children some choice, it is still based on the model of the teacher as the primary organizer of preschool life. Children are not imagined here as undertaking activities they could devise, e.g. working on group projects independently of a teacher or only with her assistance. Thus, the dominant teacher-child structure was still retained[68].

The fact that an increase in the number of teachers working with a group would not necessarily imply giving more autonomy to children clearly emerged from Preschool A teachers' narratives. One of them left no doubt that the role of an additional person working with a group would be to ensure closer control over children – albeit mainly those who failed to live up the to ideal of a proper preschooler :

> In our group it would be good to have an additional person because of what the children were like. It would help us a lot if the other person could for

67 Interestingly, this idea developed by Ms Agnieszka from Preschool B corresponded with the vision of a good preschool that some of the children attending her group imagined, where teachers offered different activities and children could choose what they would like to do. This kind of correspondence was entirely missing from Preschool A children's and teacher's accounts.

68 Agnieszka Tkaczyńska drew my attention to this fact.

> example look after Harcon or Scooby Doo, or Zak or Subaru. She would react to them in a different way and we could carry out our activities in a different way, we wouldn't have to deal with Harcon. (Ms Małgorzata, Preschool A, interview 2007)

Although the hierarchical child-adult structure remained largely untouched in the comments made by both preschools' teachers, a difference between their approaches is evident. The Preschool B teacher talked about having a number of adults who simultaneously organize various activities as an opportunity for children to choose whatever would best suit their interests. The Preschool A teacher saw it as a chance to control misbehaved children so that the regular teacher could carry on her work undisturbed. While distinct educational philosophies present in each of the preschools may account for the difference, Preschool A teachers' emphasis on increased order could also stem from their difficulties coping with the group. As indicated in Chapter 1, several children attending Preschool A were diagnosed as emotionally disturbed and requiring special assistance. The preschool, however, was not sufficiently prepared for ensuring proper care and education for such children. First of all, there was no adequate professional support. The teachers had to rely on an external Psychological-Pedagogical Counseling Center for a child's diagnosis and assistance. In the principal's view, the collaboration was far from satisfactory. She emphasized that in preschools in milieus such as theirs, teachers should be assisted by an in-house psychologist or a special needs counsellor.

The teachers generally shared the opinion that both they themselves and the children would benefit from having additional staff members who could work with individual children on a one-to-one or a small group basis. Olechowska (2006: 130) points out that teachers' limited knowledge concerning special needs children (resulting from inadequate training) precludes them from achieving any meaningful outcomes when working with them. This, in turn, may prompt them to hand over the responsibility for caring for such children to "specialists" and have the children transferred to special preschools. Harcon is a case in point. Al-Khamisy's (2006) analysis of Polish preschools from the perspective of the integration of special needs children demonstrates that existing legal regulations only loosely support the idea of including such children in the system of regular preschool education. The case of Preschool A makes it clear. For instance, the local Department of Education, responsible for financing preschools, was not sufficiently responsive to the preschool's need for additional personnel that would facilitate work with special needs children. As the principal claimed, the

authorities either ignored her requests or suggested that she should undertake some rather impracticable steps, such as developing innovative programs or doing the fundraising herself.

The lack of adequate structural solutions enabling a proper response to the needs of children requiring special attention was also an issue in Preschool B. As a result of the fact that only one teacher at a time took care of the group, individual work with children was illusionary:

> I can't take those children out of the room for 15 minutes. I have to stay in the room where other kids are playing. And of course when they are playing, there will be noise. Every once in a while a child would come to me because something happened or they want something. And here I am working with the two kids. What kind of concentration is this and what is the point of working with those kids when others are playing and interrupting? (Ms Agnieszka, Preschool B, interview, 2007)

What emerges from the teachers' accounts is a sense of impossibility or, at best, a limited possibility of taking appropriate action. Staff members are expected to fulfill certain requirements without being provided with resources necessary to do so. In many cases inadequate funding lied at the core of the problem. Teachers in both preschools often talked about the lack of money for teaching aids, which forced them to hand-make their own, thus spending extra time and resources. The absence of additional staff, including a psychologist dramatically needed in Preschool A, was also the outcome of decisions concerning funding taken by the local authorities. While such decisions were, in the view of local authorities, economically justified, they resulted in placing an additional burden on the teachers.

## Bureaucracy

One of the most common elements of the teachers' perception of their occupation was the apparent importance of purely bureaucratic tasks. Teachers were expected to complete a significant load of paperwork: writing yearly, monthly, weekly and daily plans and reports, child reports and one's own personal development schemes. They considered most of it not only tiring, but also rather irrelevant. In their view, a lot of it was devoid of any significant relation to everyday preschool life and had no importance for improving the quality of teachers' work with children. In the teachers' opinion, a lot of meaningless paperwork was required in relation to their professional development. Attaining consecutive stages of the teacher's

advancement track entailed preparing detailed action plans for a period of a few years, documenting all activities undertaken and reporting on the work done. Apart from having the effect of forcing teachers to do a lot of writing – in most cases at home, in their free time – it could also limit teachers' freedom and creativity. As Ms Agnieszka noted, instead of constantly developing, searching for new ideas and trying them out, teachers were forced to fit in a "rigid framework," as she put it, and stick to a plan they were requested to prepare years earlier and might not find interesting any longer. In this way, what was intended to stimulate the teachers' professional development, proved to be a constraint.

The teachers had rather mixed feelings about another instrument of professional development, namely short-term training courses aimed at improving teachers' qualifications in specific areas. Teachers, especially those working toward attaining the next stage in their professional advancement track, were requested to participate in a number of them. While they never questioned the importance of enhancing their qualifications, the teachers often felt that they were forced to participate in courses merely for the sake of meeting institutional requirements. One of the teachers was quite honest about it, saying that:

> All the teacher's development agencies and assistants, they all want the teachers to improve their qualifications. They are also obliged to organize all sorts of workshops, training sessions, and how are they to ensure they get enough participants? Only by forcing us to improve our qualifications all the time. So we are requested to attend courses every year. (Ms Małgorzata, Preschool A, interview, 2007)

Yet, the courses offered did not always fit the interests and needs of the teachers who, as a result, spent afternoons or weekends learning about issues possibly irrelevant for their daily work, while still not being provided with assistance in matters where they needed it. Some teachers experienced a problem of abundance. As one of them said, "I did a year long course, and now, the next year, the same old story: I have to choose another course. And when are we supposed to put all that we have gotten to know into practice?" The teachers seemed to be caught in a web of bureaucratic requirements that did not respond well to their needs while putting additional obligations on them. The lack of correspondence between requirements placed on the teachers, and resources and support they were offered, often emerged as a significant issue. I will take it up again in later parts of this chapter.

## Fatigue

The organization of preschool life in which a number of responsibilities were placed on the teachers without providing them with adequate assistance had a very specific consequence: a prevalent sense of tiredness among the teachers. While in casual conversations Preschool B teachers complained about feeling overworked, frequent references to fatigue were particularly striking in Preschool A teachers' narratives. They attributed their tiredness to long working hours (especially when a co-teacher was absent and they had to work double shifts) and an excessive workload:

> The aides were absent all the time, so all the time I had to serve meals, set the tables, something would be missing all the time with one aide working for two groups, so all in all, it was for the teachers: serve the meal, clean up, take out the dishes and do your work with the children. (Ms Zosia, Preschool A, interview, 2007)

They also pointed to challenges posed by the specific group of children with which they were working as a reason for their fatigue. The children's unpredictable behavior that could potentially lead to their hurting themselves or each other, their disobedience and resistance resulted in the teachers' feelings of constant tension. Tense muscles, aching legs or headaches were frequent features of Preschool A teachers' accounts of their work. Significantly, such images rarely appeared in Preschool B teachers' narratives. This may suggest, in line with the Preschool A staff's conviction, that working with their group was indeed particularly challenging and exhausting. However, it may also indicate that the teachers' style of work, characterized by discipline and strict control over all aspects of children's behavior, was counterproductive: rather than ensuring order in the group, it brought about more conflicts and disagreements that the teachers had to solve. This, in turn, rendered them more tired, easily irritable and prone to act in an impatient manner toward children who responded to it with increased disobedience. Yet, irrespective of its exact causes, it is important to note that fatigue was a common experience of the preschool teachers that certainly had an impact on their behavior and reactions.

# Changes in preschool education and child-adult relations

Some of the factors contributing to the difficulties the teachers experienced in relation to their job resulted from changes that had taken place in the field of preschool education: decreased funding for childcare provisions, a growing emphasis on documenting teachers' work or higher demands concerning professional competences of the preschool staff. However, changes were more numerous and occurred on various planes. They concerned not only the role and organization of the preschool, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the generational order and, embedded in it, the understanding of the position of teachers and expectations of them, the construction of a child, and child-adult relations. Changes in all of these dimensions intertwined, rendering teachers' work more complex and demanding. In Chapter 5 I indicated that some of the positions that teachers would have traditionally taken in relation to children (especially those based on a strict child-adult distinction) became increasingly problematic, which resulted in the teachers' feelings of tension and uncertainty. Now I will discuss this issue in more detail, pointing to changes in demands placed on teachers in the remodeled preschool education system, and to changes in the discursive construction of the teacher, the child and the generational order.

## Organizational changes and new demands on teachers

Institutionalized childcare has been increasingly embedded in the market economy and has become subject to regulation by its instruments. This has had various consequences for the functioning of preschools. Restricted financial support from local authorities forced individual preschools to become partly responsible for seeking additional funding for themselves (which entailed pressure on principals and other teachers to enlist support from sponsors and an expectation of parents' increased financial participation in preschool life). Prioritizing profit-making meant closing down preschools whose maintenance was not deemed economically viable. Preschools had to work out a number of solutions to respond to this situation. One of them was forming mixed-age groups. A necessity in both preschools, such an arrangement was a challenge for the teachers who were used to working with children of the same age. Some of them found it rather problematic to plan

and carry out activities in such a way that needs of all children in a group were met, as the following excerpt illustrates:

> With this mix of 14 [children of this age], 8 [children of that age], and with their hyperactivity, it was difficult to get around to doing something with the 5 year olds. Very little time for them, only in the morning or so, because usually all the activities were based on the 6 year olds because their curriculum was more important and had to be worked on. Different ages are burdensome. (Ms Małgorzata, Preschool A, interview, 2007)

The same teacher also talked about difficulties posed by the necessity to work simultaneously with children with different abilities and to adjust the material to their needs:

> We used to have clear guidelines for the three year old, the four year old, the five year old, and the six year old, and now the guidelines that we get are that we should to manipulate, so for instance half of the group can say "good morning" and the other half can also say "good bye." And we should adapt to it, to gradate the requirements. And some things get lost because in order to come out alright, to show that we do all that we have to do, we would usually concentrate on the upper part, and the bottom part – well, you can then see in practice that some things are still left behind. (Ms Małgorzata, Preschool A, interview, 2007)

It has been observed that the Polish educational system is deeply marked by a behaviorist approach to teaching and learning (Klus-Stańska 2006). One of the assumptions in this approach is that children develop in the same way and learn the same things, in the same manner and at the same pace (*ibid.*: 21). Ms Małgorzata clearly draws on this legacy when she talks about the difficulties related to adapting material to different children's abilities. She also emphasizes the need for the teachers to fulfill all predefined requirements, which Klus-Stańska also interprets as the behavioristic legacy (*ibid.*: 23). Mechanization of the teachers' work, as she refers to it, implies that they are expected to merely follow curricula, work in line with schemes or lesson plans prepared beforehand without having to reconsider them or adapt them to the needs of specific children ("We used to have clear guidelines"). The conviction that a teacher needs to implement a complete plan emerges from Ms Małgorzata's comment: to avoid being accused of not having carried out their work properly, the teachers would concentrate on more advanced issues even at the expense of some children who need more time and are lagging behind.

In this context the focus on the six-year-olds as opposed to five-year-olds also is symptomatic. Treating older children in a more serious manner than the younger ones could result from the fact that the preschool attendance was mandatory for the six-year-old as a form of school preparation. The teachers felt pressure to provide the children with competences, skills and qualifications they needed for making a smooth transition to school and in light of this obligation the needs of the five-year-olds, whose preschool attendance was only optional and who still had one year remaining in preschool, were pushed to the background.

Siarkiewicz (1999: 89) claims that designing and implementing programs is considered one of the primary tasks of a preschool. It is also the main aspect taken into account in evaluation procedures. Falkiewicz-Szult (2003: 18) goes even further and argues that teachers are slaves to centrally-designed detailed curricula of preschool education and are obligated to "cover the material." In her view, this obligation leads to a dilemma that preschool teachers are unable to solve: their understanding of their professional role of those who direct children's development collides with the need to meet requirements formulated by decision makers. Ms Małgorzata's comments quoted above reveal the existence of such a conflict. The teachers were aware of neglecting younger children or those who learned at a slower pace, and simultaneously felt compelled to achieve the highest standards set for the group. Moreover, while expected to be able to work with mixed-age and/or ability groups, they were clearly not prepared for it and lacked necessary skills. Thus, yet another field where the teachers experienced inadequate assistance opened up.

Yet, the introduction of mixed-age groups was not the only, and certainly not the most significant, outcome of the transformations preschools underwent as a result of social-political changes taking place in the country. One of the clearest symptoms of the inclusion of preschools in the market economy was increasing – although informal – competitiveness among preschools. In line with a philosophy of investing in children, preschools were assessed on the basis of the attractiveness of their offer. This implied a growing pressure on children to learn more and more, including learning through participation in a number of extracurricular activities ("I don't know where all this is going to lead to, what kind of doctors are going to graduate from the preschool," as one of the Preschool A teachers ironically observed). It also entailed a stronger time constraint both for children, who had less and less time for play, and for teachers who had to strive to implement the

curriculum. Falkiewicz-Szult (2007: 150), writing about symbolic violence in Polish preschools, points to the commonality of working under time constraints. As I demonstrated in Chapter 7, this had an influence on children who were forced to function within time limits set by the teachers and often were not given a sufficient amount of time for completing their work. Yet, setting time limits may stem from the teachers' own sense of time constraints. Teachers in Falkiewicz-Szult's research often felt forced to cover all the material included in the curriculum; they also were under control of the preschool principals, teacher advisors and other administrators to whom they were obliged to report on the work done and who evaluated them. Fear that they would not manage to cover everything they should was common among the teachers Falkiewicz-Szult spoke with. It was also visible among the teachers in my research, and it often resulted in a feeling of impatience, irritability and tension that marked their interactions with children.

Moreover, for a preschool to exist in the market economy, it had to "promote itself." This implied organizing "open events, such as a new preschoolers welcome, Christmas dinners, breakfasts, and parties," as one of Preschool A teachers observed. While most of the staff members complained about the additional workload and tension resulting from the need to organize open events, she was particularly explicit about the rationale behind the tendency to hold them in great numbers and its detrimental effects on the preschool life:

> I don't know how exactly it is evaluated by the authorities, but I am sure they would say: Nothing is going on at your place, there are no competitions, you don't participate in anything, that is, you are not visible. And then the principal would get scolded, and we would get scolded for doing nothing. And we say that we are losing the children. We have said that to the principal so many times: all this bureaucracy, this chase for material that was imposed on us... And the child is left behind. Sometimes we don't even have the time to give the children what we should. (Ms Małgorzata, Preschool A, interview, 2007)

She perceived the pressure on the preschool to "promote itself" as stemming from the apparent need to ensure parents and local educational authorities that the institution is "full of life," that it has an interesting, attractive offer, and that a lot is happening there apart from regular activities. In her view, a move from a preschool open to the children to a preschool open to its surroundings had taken place, and now children were expected to show outsiders (i.e., parents, children from other preschools, representatives of local

authorities and so on) what they have learned and are capable of accomplishing. This places additional demands on both the children and the teachers. Falkiewicz-Szult (2007: 151) notices a more and more widespread tendency to make children rehearse for open events during their free play time, to which they often respond with resistance and anger. Yet, open events are demanding for the teachers as well. First, they "messed up the work with children," in Ms Małgorzata's words, since the teachers had to rearrange their already busy daily schedules to find time for preparing additional events. Second, open events were fairly stressful for the teachers who experienced them as assessment situations. The parents were to see how well their children performed, and the success or failure of the performance was to be the measure of the teacher's achievements. This was even more so in the case of inter-preschool events. As Ms Agnieszka explained, other teachers would observe children's performance and criticize it (as well as the teacher in charge of it) if they did not find it good enough; other preschools' principals could comment on it to the principal of the preschool giving the performance, and she would in turn express her dissatisfaction. In this way, such events added to the pressure and stress the teachers experienced, and caused competition and distrust among teachers who feared their colleagues' criticism.

At the same time, if successful, open events could be an important instrument of boosting a teacher's self-confidence and provide a sense of accomplishment:

> What we had taught them was shown to the outside world. It was motivating for us; look, my children have done so well. Because I treat it all like... well... my own success: how nicely they sang, how well they presented themselves. (Ms Zosia, Preschool A, interview, 2007)

As a result, the teachers spent long hours training children in correct dancing, singing songs and reciting poems, preoccupied with the idea of a proper performance. Klus-Stańska (2006: 22) interprets the "correctness orientation" as another sign of the behavioristic approach in the Polish educational system and points out that doing things in a correct manner (according to a plan, without making mistakes etc.) functions as one of the main criteria for the assessment of teachers' and children's work (*ibid.*: 23). The correctness orientation and assessment attitude meant that children's failure to achieve perfection could be easily interpreted as calling teachers' competences into question.

The implication of such changes was the experience of conflict and tension that the teachers had to face. Feeling compelled to organize their work in such a way as to ensure that they would be perceived as successful, active teachers, capable of providing their pupils with a plethora of opportunities, they simultaneously realized that by doing so, they could as well be working against children's needs. This, in turn, forced them to question and reconsider their own standing as preschool teachers.

## Changes in the generational order and in the constructions of the teacher and the child

Preschool is a discursively organized reality: it is directed by regimes of truth which define what preschool should be like, what its role is, or how teachers and children should act. Since preschools are institutions where children and adults meet, preschool regimes of truth can be claimed to be embedded in a wider discourse on the generational order. In the Foucaultian perspective, discourses are seen as constitutive. They determine what positions individuals can occupy and therefore constitute them as subjects. Discourses help to construct social relationships between people, as well as systems of knowledge and beliefs (Fairclough 1992: 64). Thus, preschool teachers know how to think and act, i.e., they are capable of governing themselves as proper preschool teachers. Moreover, they often are unable to conceive of acting otherwise since the regime of truth demarcates the thinkable and normal.

The notion of the generational order as a regime of truth (i.e., dominant discourses that determine what counts as true) helps to understand why taking some of the positions available for the teachers entailed the feeling of tension and uncertainty. Generational order is reproduced by teachers and children in their interactions, yet to an extent it also exists independently of them. Alanen (2001b) talks about this independence in terms of the structural character of the generational order. Generationing – a set of processes whereby some people are positioned as children, while others are positioned as adults – results in situating individuals in an objectively existing structure. Since generationing is a process of the construction of the positions, it presupposes agency. However, the structures in which individuals are situated, to some extent determine what actions they can undertake. Changes in the generational structure, caused, for instance, by changes in a wider societal discourse on children and their rights, or on the meaning and role of childcare institutions, entail that some positions begin to appear more legitimate than others.

Moreover, the relational character of the generational order implies that transformations of the child position influence the adult position. This means that preschool teachers, while using the generational order as a resource to draw on when establishing their position, are also constrained by it. As a result, the process of positioning themselves as preschool teachers appears to be fairly demanding. It could be conceived as balancing between newly emerging positions that the teachers feel they should take or would like to take, and those they are used to taking and which appear most natural to them, but that become more and more questionable. One such position is that of the teacher as distinct from children, in particular in its extreme form of a teacher as an uncompromising ruler using physical power to exact children's obedience. However, the child position is now increasingly constructed through, for instance, legal documents such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Forcing children to act against their will, but in accordance with the teacher's wish, contravenes Article 12 of the Convention, which stipulates that children have the right to express their views in matters that concern them and that those views will be given due weight. The position of the teacher as an educator also appears problematic in the light of the Convention. Article 13 gives children the right to freedom of expression, which includes the right to seek and receive all kinds of information and ideas. While providing children with knowledge remains in accordance with this regulation, the teachers' power to determine what and how the children will learn is more disputable.

As these examples indicate, changes in the discourse concerning generational order, as well as children's and adults' positions, could contribute to the teachers' experiences of difficulties they faced in their jobs as much as the changing organization of preschools did. It could be argued that the preschool teachers in my research found themselves in a moment of transition: long-known positions and ways of relating to children ceased to be universally accepted and the teachers were forced to reconsider their role. At the same time new discourses appeared still too foreign for them to easily adopt. This could lead to the teachers' experience of insecurity, lack of self-confidence, or uncertainty about their own professional standing.

## The teacher's role and pedagogical practice

In the preschool context, one of the constitutive factors of the discourse on a proper teacher is a principal's views on the teacher's role and obligations. The

principals at both institutions had a very clear idea as to what a preschool teacher should be like. Particularly significant is the fact that their visions differed, which may partly explain the differences in the attitudes and behavior of the teachers in each preschool. This also indicates that new discourses on the generational order and preschool education occupied a different place in each institution.

The Preschool A principal's construction of a proper teacher appeared somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, she imagined a good teacher to be a "searching" one who "doesn't stop at one place," who reads a lot, is up to date with teaching methods and can apply multiple methods to her work. At the same time, however, she put a very strong emphasis on the teacher's ability to "come back to old methods that have always been good and can be used with some groups." She opposed the "old methods" to active methods aimed at involving children and stimulating their creativity, and which she perceived as failing to discipline children and make them dependable and earnest. She presented Ms Małgorzata and Ms Zosia as exemplary teachers, capable of employing old methods:

> They are so detailed, aesthetic and they teach this to the children. And they approach everything in a very calm manner, that is... they don't rush when it is about time for lunch or a trip, they have planned everything in advance. "Now we are cleaning up," they say to the kids, and they are really busy cleaning up, tidying up things and they discipline children in this way. (Preschool A principal, interview, 2007)

Well-visible here is the emphasis on order, strict planning that precludes chaos and the position of a teacher as the one who decides what and when is going to take place. A similar attitude emerged from her reflection on pedagogical education in the past:

> These were schools that did a good job preparing [us to teach in such a way] that there was a plan for a day, and we had to prepare that plan. There was a morning slot, and in the morning slot you were supposed to do this and that, and morning gymnastics. And now just try to go to some classrooms and see if teachers do that. Sometimes they return [to these old ways], but not always. (Preschool A principal, interview, 2007)

The principal's emphasis on the advantages of past teaching methods that highlighted the detailed, top-down planning of an entire school day, seems to be at odds with her declared preference for "searching" teachers. It could be claimed that what emerges from her narrative is the vision of a teacher who

seeks new ideas and ways of doing things, but only within a limited scope of possibilities. The boundaries of what is possible are marked by the presence of a teacher as an unquestionable authority figure, as the "old methods" leave little room for children to contribute their ideas and influence preschool life in a meaningful way. What such a construction of a proper teacher and teaching practice suggests is the balancing between the old and the new that took place in the preschool. A "searching" teacher featured in the principal's account, and preschool documents referred to active methods as desirable. In practice however, "old" ways of working with children were more readily used. It could be argued that the teachers knew how they should be acting as proper teachers in the changing context of preschool education, yet could not avoid falling back on the traditional approaches they had been following for most of their professional career. They also attributed it to the specific group they worked with:

> These old methods still proved more successful in our group because if I had allowed this group to do something and that group to play because they felt like it, I would have had nothing out of it. There would have been only noise out of the play, and the kids wouldn't have benefited from working with us because they would have been more interested in playing. (Ms Małgorzata, Preschool A, interview, 2007)

Preschool B principal's expectations of the teachers and pedagogical practice there appeared to be rather different. First of all, the preschool participates in a municipal project *Wrocław Educational Conception*, which promotes learning and development through art with a special emphasis on active teaching methods. Teachers working at preschools (and schools) participating in the project are expected to continually improve their qualifications in working with children using a variety of innovative, creative and unconventional methods as well as in designing their own curricula and educational projects. As the principal said:

> One of the conditions for joining the *Wrocław Educational Conception* was that teachers use active methods in working with children; learning through play, through art activities that make it possible for children to develop and express themselves. (Preschool B principal, interview, 2007)

Nowhere did she refer to the putative danger of active methods as those that undermine order and discipline. Instead, she emphasized children's choice and the ideal of following the child:

> This is the stage where you do not impose one solution [on children], and sometimes the solutions that children come up with surprise the teacher herself. We prepare a lesson plan and after two sentences it falls into pieces because the children have gone in another direction. And it depends on the teacher whether she will push to stick to the plan or will follow the children to what is more interesting for them. (Preschool B principal, interview, 2007)

Pedagogical practice in Preschool B could therefore be interpreted as related to such understandings of the child that emphasize children's agency, creativity and right to have a voice in matters that concern them. It was also a response to the observed changes in children's behavior: their increased knowledge and skills in various fields (as the principal put it, "kids nowadays are 150 times smarter than some adults; they have already mastered computers and so on"), broad interests and high expectations that rendered them unlikely to be satisfied with any activity the teacher offers them. This placed a demand on the teachers to reconsider and modify their position in relation to children: they had to cease to act as an unquestioned authority who can impose their own will, instead, they had to respond to children's interests. Such an attitude stood in stark contrast to the Preschool A principal's view on the role of the teacher:

> If the teacher prepares activities at home, if she makes a plan, a prepared plan for a day and an outline, she will be able to catch children's interest and even if she does not cover everything, she will still carry out an activity in such a way that the children will be very interested. (Preschool A principal, interview, 2007)

Here children are not perceived as those who can influence the teacher's practice and therefore have an impact on what and how they are going to learn. Rather, they are considered recipients of the teacher's instructions, and the teachers' task is to capture their attention and stir their interests. What emerges from the Preschool A principal's view is again the behavioristic legacy in teaching. Klus-Stańska (2006: 21) points to methodic instrumentality as one of the characteristic features of this approach. Teachers carefully plan their own actions ("a sequence of planned triggers") and predict children's reactions to them. As a result, in her view, children's conceptual activeness is lost because "outlines anticipated their every action and thought" (*ibid.*). Seen from this perspective, the teacher's role is not supposed to be to open up spaces for children to experiment, discover phenomena or try out things, but to train children to act in a predefined manner according to a plan. As I have demonstrated in previous chapters, Preschool A teachers acted in line with

such prescriptions to a large extent. In a similar vein, the way in which Preschool B teachers positioned themselves and interacted with children reflected their ideological stance toward their own role.

As this analysis shows, the relation between teachers' practices and the changing generational order differed in each place. Preschool B seemed to adopt the new understandings of the child and the teacher and their mutual relations to a larger degree than Preschool A, where teachers tended to cling to more traditional approaches. The lack of correspondence between Preschool A teachers' adherence to the "old methods" and challenges posed by changes in the generational order could account for their feelings of dissatisfaction and disheartenment.

## Teacher's authority and prestige

When discussing parents' attitudes toward teachers, the Preschool B principal observed:

> Parents used to trust [the teachers]. They knew that when they sent their children to the preschool, they would be looked after by professionals. And when the teacher complained about the child, they would be spanked or reprimanded, because 'you have to obey the teacher, because the teacher substitutes here for the mother or father'. (Preschool B principal, interview, 2007)

The principal pointed to two aspects of the teacher's position that were a point of reference for all the teachers in my research: parents' trust and respect for teachers and the teacher as an authority figure for children. These features that used to characterize the teacher's position in the past have now lost some of their significance, and all the staff members appeared to share the view that their occupation was perceived as lacking prestige and not deserving respect. They claimed that parents, educational institutions and society at large considered their job easy, undemanding and not valuable. A Preschool B teacher's comment captured the general sentiment:

> People usually think that anyone can come to work in a preschool. And the policies also aim at paying teachers less. There have already been plans to make it possible for people without pedagogical education to work in a preschool. And this may happen one day. (Ms Patrycja, Preschool B, interview, 2007)

Two issues regularly emerged in the teachers' narratives: that they were treated, first, as if they were not teachers at all, and, second, as if all they did was mere childcare work which was undemanding and did not require any special qualifications. They strongly objected to the first idea. They pointed to the educational aspects of their work and insisted on being called a "teacher" instead of a *przedszkolanka*[69]. The latter was a term derived from the word "preschool" (*przedszkole*) and customarily applied to preschool staff, and the teachers considered it offensive and disrespectful. They talked bitterly about parents who consistently failed to recognize the educational dimension of preschool work, as illustrated by one of the principal's comments:

> If parents come and do not ask what the children have learned or what new friends they have made, but are only interested in whether they have eaten enough, peed and played outside, then these appear to be the most important aspects of the time the children spend in preschool for their parents. (Preschool B principal, interview, 2007)

The Preschool A principal was even more explicit when she stated:

> [Parents] respect a principal a lot, but they treat teachers as babysitters. But the teachers are well educated, in many cases have done a lot of postgraduate training and are very competent, but still parents – even well-educated parents – treat them as babysitters. (Preschool A principal, interview, 2007)

In the teachers' view, parents did not realize that preschool teachers actually teach their children, inclined to think that they "rather take care of the children." This also implied disrespecting teachers' comments about their children's development and specific problems they experienced. One of the main expectations the teachers had of parents was that they would take the teachers seriously, which in some cases involved as little as making sure that a child participated in activities carried out by a group teacher and not only in those organized by outside specialists, or attending open lessons arranged for the parents.

It remains unclear whether the teachers' sense of the lack of respect for their work reflects actual changes in prestige accorded to a preschool teacher's

69 Significantly, the form they used, and which is generally used by teachers, was masculine (i.e., "male teacher"). The use of a masculine-gender term to refer to a profession where women are the vast majority, can be interpreted as an unconscious attempt to increase its prestige in a culture where masculinity is valued higher than femininity.

work in society[70], or whether it is related to their own willingness to be perceived as teachers rather than caretakers. Symptomatically, rarely did they venture to question the perception of childcare work as undemanding by referring to its significance and the challenges it posed. This could be interpreted as an attempt to downplay the care aspect of their work, which was obviously present and extremely relevant in the preschool context. The teachers wanted to position themselves as professionals, but the professionalization that mattered to them was that of the teacher, not the caretaker. This could also be a means to advance their position in the hierarchy of educational professionals. While this was only an implicit knowledge, everyone in the preschool was aware of the existence of such a hierarchy in the perception of all the parties involved: the parents ("you could say we are not judged [by the parents] as equal to school teachers," in one of the teachers' words), the local educational authorities ("high school teachers are the most important, then there are middle schools, primary schools and then finally, at the bottom of the pyramid, we sit," as the Preschool B principal observed), and the Ministry of Education (as exemplified, in the teachers' view, by plans to exclude preschool teachers from The Teacher Charter, widely discussed by the preschool staff at that time). Seen from this perspective, the teachers' frustration over their sense of being devalued can be interpreted as resulting from a discrepancy between their own perception of their job, and that of society at large. Aspiring to be considered teachers, they regarded being perceived as caretakers as disparaging.

As if in response to their experience of the lack of prestige and appreciation, Preschool A teachers constantly underlined their own achievements and those of the children they taught. They emphasized the amount of work they put into educating children and expressed their conviction that the children had learned a lot and were ready for school. In our conversations the staff members frequently mentioned songs and poems the children learned, trips and monthly library tours they participated in, as if trying to demonstrate the scope of educational work going on in the institution. Importantly, such comments never appeared in Preschool B teachers' accounts, which may suggest that they felt more confident about their own work and did not need to reassure themselves by pointing to their specific achievements. However, there can be more structural reasons for the

70 Opinion polls on occupational prestige do not include the category of preschool teacher, inquiring only about teachers in general. They have consistently indicated a relatively high level of prestige accorded to the teacher occupation.

differences in the teachers' presentation of their work. Preschool B teachers were convinced of the highly regarded reputation of their institution:

> The best preschool anyone could wish for is one such as ours. Parents give us their children because they made such a decision, because they liked the place. It was not a random place chosen because it was closest to home, because you could see it from your window. (Ms Patrycja, Preschool B, interview, 2007)

Preschool A teachers knew that a similar assessment of their institution was much less likely. The preschool was located in one of the poorest, most destitute neighborhoods in the city. The building was in an inadequate condition: paint was peeling off the exterior walls and some of the rooms were filled with an unpleasant stench coming from the dish washing room. It was surrounded by old, dilapidated apartment buildings and a muddy courtyard, covered with puddles when it rained. Most of the children lived nearby and were raised in rather impoverished families. As one of the teachers noticed, it was highly unlikely for higher-status parents, living in other parts of the city, to enroll their child in that preschool as they would be ashamed to admit it to their friends. Thus, the teachers cherished rare examples of children from other neighborhoods who attended their preschool and enjoyed it. In a similar vein, the teachers could not be certain about their pupils' academic successes. Raised in underprivileged families by often poorly educated parents, the children frequently needed additional assistance and special care, rather than being equipped with competences facilitating learning achievements. In this context, the teachers' emphasis on the children's accomplishments and their own (successful) efforts to teach them as much as possible can be interpreted not only as an attempt to counterbalance a widespread perception of the preschool teachers' job as undemanding, but also, and more importantly, as an attempt to cope with their feeling of insecurity about the meaning of their own work as employees in this particular institution. Lacking self-confidence and confronted with an outsider – and a researcher – they might have felt compelled to try to ensure that I realized and appreciated the scope and significance of their work. The interview situation could therefore function for the teachers as a space where they could establish themselves as deserving recognition and respect. At the same time, however, their insistence on demonstrating their successfulness exposed their vulnerability. One could hypothesize that the teachers' insecurity and vulnerability played a role in their attempts to position themselves as unquestionable authority figure in their interactions with children.

The feeling of nonrecognition and disheartenment that emerged very clearly from Preschool A teachers' accounts can also be related to their perception of their job as requiring a great deal of devotion, dedication and sacrifice. The teachers depicted themselves as putting a lot of energy into their work and spending their free time doing things for the children. One day Ms Małgorzata showed me her stained hands, explaining that she had spent long hours at home making small color tissue paper balls for the children to use for art work. She quoted her husband's ironic comment: "And what are you doing? The good Ms Małgorzata, again doing everything for the children." She also described her involvement in designing and planting the preschool garden that she worked on after hours, planting plants she brought from her own garden.

The principal also expected devotion from her teachers. As she said, "If a teacher sacrifices herself, you can count on her a lot. Otherwise it is difficult." She was quite critical of teachers who did not stay after hours to do extra work or were not sufficiently diligent in carrying out their duties. This is another feature distinguishing the two preschools. While Preschool B teachers also put a lot of extra time and energy into their work, they did not talk about it in terms of sacrifice. Instead, the framework they used was one of satisfaction, willingness to create opportunities for children to develop or the awareness of children's achievements and progress. In the same vein, the principal expressed her satisfaction with the fact that despite very difficult circumstances the teachers were still enthusiastic and devoted to their work, rather than expecting sacrifice from them. She interpreted the words of teachers who would say that they get up in the morning and feel like going to work as a sign of success[71].

The sacrifice attitude to their work adopted by Preschool A teachers implied that they believed they had invested a lot in their work, and did not feel appreciated enough for it. They expected gratitude for their devotion from the children and their parents, and often felt they did not receive it. Sometimes they communicated it openly to the children ("Ms Małgorzata and I are good for you, but you have no heart for us"). This feeling of the lack of gratefulness might have been compounded by the fact that both Preschool A

71 This is not meant to imply that Preschool A teachers experienced a lack of appreciation from their principal or extensive pressure on doing an increasing amount of work. In fact, they talked a lot about the support they got from the principal and a positive, motivating environment she created in the institution. I only suggest that a sense of sacrifice was one of the aspects of the discourse on a preschool teacher circulating there, and commonly shared by the teachers.

group teachers were older and approaching retirement in the upcoming months, and had just experienced a few years of work with children they considered unusually difficult and whose parents were not as appreciative and involved in preschool life as the teachers would have liked them to be. Their attempts to establish themselves as dominant in relation to children and to restore a hierarchical generational order with adults as an unquestionable authority could be perceived as a means to cope with their frustration.

## Children and preschool

Changes in the understanding of children and the preschool institution had a strong impact on the teachers' work. The teachers strongly emphasized that changes in the way that children were constructed (or, in the teachers' vocabulary, the way they were, behaved, or had been raised) made their work more difficult to handle. Just as the Preschool A principal appreciated the old approach to educating teachers, the teachers praised the way preschools were organized and how children acted in the past. Their memories of past work experiences served as an important point of reference in the construction of the preschool as they would like to see it:

> Activities were organized in a different way: Polish language twice and art three times a week. The activities were planned and the rhythm was different, a different curriculum, and children were also used to it. Breakfast, and then it was good because there was nap time, and all the kids slept. The framework was different and there were not so many stimulating activities. There were only those activities we [the group teachers] did. (Ms Zosia, Preschool A, interview, 2007)

The teacher is nostalgic for past times when everything was organized and predictable, when there was a steady rhythm, all children did the same activities and the group teacher was an unquestionable authority figure, fully in control of their work. A specific construction of the child – quiet, disciplined and obedient – was one dimension of this dream. The memory (or, perhaps, a construction) of children the teachers used to work with in the past played an important role in developing that dream:

> The children were different. They were so quiet. You could say anything to those children and they listened to you with their mouth wide open. They could listen, they simply listened. They were so subordinated, so compliant, they trusted what the teacher said. They all had the sense of what they should do. It was enough for the teacher to say: You mustn't do this, and they passed

> it on to each other. They were so subordinated. Now there is no such subordination. (Ms Zosia, Preschool A, interview, 2007)

The increasing difficulty the teachers experienced with proposing activities to children that would satisfy them, as well as the children's ability to threaten the existing power structure, were perceived by the teachers as a serious challenge:

> And the worst day was probably Monday. Later, on Tuesdays, Wednesdays they [children] got used to it, calmed down, and then again Mondays were the worst, because the atmosphere was so lax. And I also think that the hardest work with children is in summer. The more freedom they have and the more time on the playground, the less obedient they are. They don't concentrate any more, they have too much of everything, they refuse and they only want to do what they see fit and break rules. (Ms Zosia, Preschool A, interview, 2007)

One of the Preschool B teachers also found children's lack of discipline particularly problematic:

> What I think is most annoying is the fact that children can't stay disciplined, that they are not able to be obedient, that they don't have the sense of what is important at a given time: when we eat, we eat, when we study, we study, when we play, we play. All children should know their place and respect the timing for all those things in the preschool. Sometimes it is really hard. This is what annoys me the most, that lack of discipline. (Ms Patrycja, Preschool B, interview, 2007)

By identifying the greatest difficulties they face, the teachers indicated what they considered desirable working conditions and proper preschool practice. The emphasis on order, routines, and predictability as well as on children's discipline and obedience is particularly striking here. Within such a framework, the idea that the norm could be to enable children to follow their wishes and interests and to decide themselves what is appropriate to do at a given moment is inconceivable.

Kampmann (2004: 149-150) interprets the attempts to reintroduce a clear order where "a child [is] a child, an adult [is] an adult" and where adults are considered experts, as a defensive reaction to demands of adopting new ways of relating to children which may be difficult to comprehend. Such an interpretation seems to be to the point as far as the teachers in my research are concerned (and especially those in Preschool A). They were confronted with a changing reality where they were forced to relinquish some of their authority. They could no longer expect that children would automatically accept their dominant position and enthusiastically welcome everything that

staff members offered them. Their response to it was constructing their ideal preschool as a place with a clear-cut structure and unambiguously defined rights and responsibilities. They also tried to enact it in their daily practice: by meticulously planning children's actions, by keeping children under control, if necessary by forcing them to undertake steps they deemed appropriate. This, however, clashed with new regimes of truth about the child and child-adult relations. More and more powerful discourses on children's bodily integrity and their rights to express their views and make decisions on issues of concern to them, or on mutual respect and equality in child-adult relations, rendered the traditional teachers' positions untenable. By holding to the long-taken positions, the teachers could not avoid the feeling of being torn between the sense of safety resulting from positioning themselves in a way they had known, and the sense of acting inappropriately.

Another aspect of the generational order that proved highly constraining was the ideal of an adult as a child's protector. The sense of responsibility for ensuring children's safety was a permanent feature of the job of a preschool teacher. The teachers felt that this was what (at least some) parents expected of them and even if it was not expressed explicitly, they had a sense that they had to prevent children from any physical harm. As a result, fear constantly accompanied the teachers who also talked a lot about their feeling of tension, anxiety and physical pain resulting from the constant observation of children. Although none of the teachers heard about a staff member being held financially responsible for a child's misfortune, some of them worried that this could happen:

> I was so terribly afraid. I am insured, I have liability insurance, and for so many years I have paid for an extra policy in dollars, because I am always worried that I may have to pay someone. (Ms Zosia, Preschool A, interview, 2007)

At the same time, there was an explicit demand on the teachers to ensure children's safety. The same teacher said:

> Here we are burdened with so much; the principal always talks about safety. We are not allowed to leave the group alone unless there is an adult there, but according to the rules the teacher should always be there. All the time with the children, everywhere with the children and we must not take one step away from them. This is what [the principal] said: observe them all the time and react to them. (Ms Zosia, Preschool A, interview, 2007)

Both preschools' teachers underscored that a child "basically at any moment can be subject to injury, an accident," so "you have to look ahead" and "keep an eye out all the time. And have eyes in the back of your head, as they say." Particularly important, especially in the Preschool A teachers' view, was the control over children they described as hyperactive or emotionally disturbed, i.e., not complying with the ideal of a competent preschooler who knows safety regulations and abides by them. As one of the teachers said, "with our boys you never knew what they might do." Another revealed that by working with such children, she experienced physical tension because they were impulsive and tended to break rules, and she was unable to predict their reactions: "and even though they can't do it, I know they will throw a block, and it makes me more alert, I have to watch them or control them with my voice"[72].

Preschool B teachers, however, openly admitted that focus on children's safety resulting from the teacher's fear may lead to the implementation of far-reaching proscriptions and sometimes they moved away from it:

> I thought at some point that basically you can forbid them to do everything. And in the beginning of my work I was so worried about the children and I would forbid everything. But as time passes you become more experienced, I had my own children and I simply [forbid] less and less. But I am also afraid. I am afraid, and I limit their freedom – consciously, I know about it. Because I am afraid. (Ms Agnieszka, Preschool B, interview, 2007)

Such statements were entirely missing from the narratives of Preschool A teachers, which indicates that they handled their anxiety in a different manner.

72 Wagner (2006) – an American early childhood educator doing research in Nordic countries – recalls her astonishment at practices that appeared to her to be entirely inconceivable in the USA context. She writes about preschoolers working with knives, saws or power drills, setting tables with china, glasses and lighted candles or hanging by their knees from a tall tree branch – and this without much interference from adults. She argues that different conceptions of a child and expectations of them, as well different understandings of the adults' role, can account for the difference. In her view, in the Nordic context, "the ideals of democracy, egalitarianism, freedom, and emancipation empower *individual* children" (*ibid.*: 293), while in the USA children are seen as being in responsible adults' charge, preparing to participate in democracy and learning to use freedom when they grow up (*ibid.*: 294). American preschool practitioners in her account could be easily substituted with Polish teachers, who would certainly be as shocked by the extent of Nordic children's exposure to hazard as Wagner was. Despite the geographic location, Polish ways of perceiving children and adults' relations to children seem closer to those typical of the USA than of the Nordic countries.

As the above quotation illustrates, coping with fear required a great deal of reflection and trust in children, but also the willingness and ability to place children's need for space and freedom over one's own anxiety. The fact that Preschool B teachers were apparently more capable of handling their fear in a way that constrained children less than those in Preschool A is symptomatic. It suggests that they constructed the child and positioned themselves differently in the generational order. Preschool A teachers' focused on their fears stemming from their obligation to ensure children's safety through a constant supervision, and constructed children as irresponsible and unreliable. Preschool A teachers, in turn, succeeded in giving priority to children's need for autonomy over their own anxiety, in the process constructing children as capable of ensuring their own safety.

## Questioning the regime of truth

The comments that Ms Agnieszka and Ms Patrycja made illustrate their breaking away from the existing regime of truth in which a teacher was fully responsible for all aspects of children's safety, even at the expense of their autonomy. By doing so, they try – consciously or not – to look at some of their own practices from the perspective of children and challenge them with children's subjugated truths – a practice that Mac Naughton refers to as "practicing for liberty" (Mac Naugton 2005: 44-45). In a similar vein Ms Zosia, a Preschool A teacher, reflected on her own teaching practices in an interview at the end of my research project and after her group had left the preschool:

> Malgorzata and I were thinking that we had strived to give the children a lot of challenges to take on and maybe the level was too high. Because you just wanted the children to read nicely, to be able to do everything and to be neat and all, and it seems to me that it all was... maybe it was a bit insane by the end. We trained them. In order to teach them, so that they could do things; our own aspirations because we wanted the children... we wanted to give them as much as possible. (Ms Zosia, Preschool A, interview, 2007)

With hindsight, she was able to see how her practices resulted from her own ambition to fulfill the predefined role of a preschool teacher as the one who provides children with knowledge and skills necessary for making a smooth transition to school. She also realized that her practices ran counter to what children needed and wanted:

> I would tell Małgorzata: The kids don't play enough in the preschool. I would say so. The recommendations we made for ourselves were such that there would be more didactics, more teaching, orders, commands... And the children were such a terrible emotional [burden] for us... So that nothing bad happens... And they were against us, they would run away. (Ms Zosia, Preschool A, interview, 2007)

Challenging the regime of truth that governs one's own behavior is difficult, and the above excerpt demonstrates how Ms Zosia is torn between admitting that her own truths could be questioned, and justifying her actions. She points to misbehaved, unruly children who had to be watched over so that "nothing bad happens" as a trigger for the decision to position herself as an authority figure. Interestingly, she also constructs herself in opposition to the other group teacher, whom she describes as stricter and less willing to give the children more space. This could be read as her attempt to present herself to me as capable of moving beyond the "old methods" the teachers usually followed: the quotations come from a conversation in which I questioned some of the practices dominant in the preschool, including surveillance and the detailed ordering of children's actions. She was aware that regimes of truth competed with each other and hers was not left unchallenged. She explained the tendency to closely control the children in the following way:

> Possibly it results – in the older teachers, maybe in my case too it can result from the fact that there used to be determined actions and a general framework of preschool work, and the old [ways] are encoded in us, the old methods. Because in the newer ones they aim at freedom and leeway. (Ms Zosia, Preschool A, interview, 2007)

The references she made to the specific training centered around "old" or "giving-oriented" methods that she received, as well as to the preschool overall system of work, prove the significance of regimes of truth for the teachers' everyday practice. To an extent the teachers had no choice but to act the way they did. They behaved the way they knew good teachers who cared for their children should behave. The appropriateness of their actions was further confirmed by the support they received from the principal and rewards they were given for their work. They were aware of the fact that alternative approaches to early childhood education existed, but they were foreign to them and therefore very difficult to appropriate. "Deliberately practicing for liberty" is possible, but it requires a great deal of reflection, attentiveness to one's own practices, openness and courage to challenge one's own truths and to take perspectives of those who are marginalized. Unsettling

one's own position is difficult and dangerous, especially in a milieu that does not support and encourage such attempts. One could also argue that it requires time and a sense of comfort. The overworked, tired teachers experiencing frustration and resentment were unlikely to be capable of undertaking such an endeavor.

What this analysis indicates is that the preschool teachers had to face a serious challenge of handling change. They appeared to be torn between conflicting agendas: on the one hand, there were old, habitual ways of acting as teachers, which they knew best and believed were most appropriate in their context. On the other hand, new approaches and understandings of the child and the preschool had been emerging which the teachers knew of and felt they should adopt. However, doing so was not an obvious choice: the teachers did not feel confident about it, lacked the competences needed for working with children in new ways, or were not convinced about their efficiency. Nonetheless, their awareness of the increasing appropriateness of following the new ways in which teachers could (should) position themselves in relation to children rendered their reliance on the customary way of being a teacher problematic. The fact that Preschool A teachers immediately explained themselves any time they acted in a way that drastically contravened the new regime of truth is a case in point, as is the teachers' tendency to construct the conception of "stress-free upbringing" which, in their view, was a newly emerging style of parent-child relationships. According to the teachers, "stress free upbringing" entailed a complete lack of rules and regulations and a reluctance by parents to adopt the position of an authority figure. Such upbringing practices were deemed accountable for difficulties the teachers had while working with children. Since such a conception does not seem to reflect any actual pedagogical approach, it could be argued that it was a construction that the teachers used in order to justify their adherence to the "old methods." At the same time, the well-known ways of relating to children, although problematic, could still function as a refuge for the teachers. The position of the adult as an unquestionable authority figure, having the right to direct children's behavior and exact their obedience was one that fit the teachers' understanding of the generational order. As a result, they fell back on it in critical situations, when they felt threatened, insecure and did not know how to act, especially since such an approach was, to an extent, seen as legitimate in their context: other teachers did so too, and a common perception of children they worked with made it defensible. Nonetheless, it could still easily render them even more frustrated and diffident as they realized that such behavior

was not universally acceptable any longer and thus called into question their professional competence.

Preschool A teachers seemed to experience such tensions to a much larger degree than Preschool B teachers. This could be attributed in part to their working conditions, their perception of the children they worked with (who, as the teachers claimed, would take over and dominate the teachers unless controlled closely), and their greater reliance on the traditional generational order compared to Preschool B teachers. The latter seemed to be more open toward the changing generational order. By treating the children in a manner closer to that they felt the children should be treated, they managed to stay away from some of the dilemmas that Preschool A teachers faced. On the other hand, however, they lacked that kind of defensive instrument that Preschool A teachers had due to establishing themselves as clearly dominant. Ms Agnieszka's comment on the need to manage her own fear in order to give children space for independent action reveals that her attempts to situate herself in the new generational order were not unproblematic. Yet, it could be argued that the way in which Preschool B teachers established their status and positioned themselves in relation to children was closer to what was considered appropriate from the perspective of children's rights, than it was in Preschool A teachers' case.

## Summary

The objective of this chapter was to discuss some factors that influenced the way in which the preschool teachers acted. Given the political, economic, social and cultural changes that have taken place in Poland, the teachers functioned in the context marked by transformations: of the generational order which contributed to establishing the teacher's position, of the concept of the child and appropriate ways of relating to children, and of preschool education as such. The consequence of the changes for the teachers was the need to take on new, multiple challenges, and the ways in which they responded to it differed. I argued that Preschool B teachers were more successful than those in Preschool A in adopting the new regimes of truth that directed their actions in relation to children. The difference could have to do with the teachers' age, discourses about children, teachers and adults that circulated in the institutions, or structural circumstances under which the preschools operated.

What remains a constant is the fact that the job of a preschool teacher had become increasingly complex and demanding. Devalued, disrespected and even disheartened, the teachers often experienced exhaustion, frustration and a lack of adequate support that clashed with growing expectations and requirements placed on them. Constrained by discursive and organizational-structural factors, they sometimes acted in a manner that seemed unacceptable. Yet, it it important to remember that it was not the outcome of the teachers' ill will, maliciousness or ignorance. More often than not, and for various reasons, it was the only way of behaving that was open to the teachers.

# Conclusions

In this final part I would like to reflect on the knowledge produced in the course of the research, and in particular on its more practical, or even political, implications. My study can be perceived as an analysis of the processes whereby children are constituted as a low – or minority – status group. In this part I want to give some thought to the societal context that make such processes possible. Finally, I consider the limitations of my project and questions that emerged in its course, and suggest some ways to develop it further.

## Reflection on the knowledge produced

During nearly three years of my fieldwork I spent hundreds of hours in institutions that are typically inaccessible to strangers. Parents visit preschools only briefly, when signing up their children and later when dropping them in the morning and picking them up in the afternoon. Parents' meetings and special events are often the only occasion for them to stay longer in the preschool – yet, being special, these situations do not give them much insight into the institution's daily work. Supervisory bodies, while frequently spending extended periods of time in preschools, base their assessments mostly on interviews with principals, questionnaires for teachers and parents and documentation analysis. Typically, they do not consult with children even though many aspects that are under evaluation concern them directly. In consequence, the everyday life of preschools, in particular as experienced by children who attend them, remains rather obscure. My special position in the preschools – of an outsider who, as a result of spending long hours there, had a chance to get acquainted with details of their functioning – created an opportunity for me to produce rather unique knowledge of the institutions and contribute to Polish educational research.

On the most general level, my study contributes to the still relatively underdeveloped field of childhood research in Poland. While educational research projects are multiple and diverse, those carried out within the framework of the so-called new sociology of childhood – with the emphasis on learning about children's views, often through ethnographic methods – are much less common. Furthermore, most of the existing research concentrates

on the school level, with preschools being visibly overlooked as a research site. This relates to the scarcity of studies with (rather than on) young children, who still tend to be perceived by researchers in sociology and education as too incompetent to be valuable research participants. My hope is that my work may help to fill in this gap and demonstrate the validity and fruitfulness of engaging children in research.

The analysis of a preschool as a site of operation of power also seems quite novel. In the Polish context, research on early childhood educational institutions tends to concentrate on didactics, solving specific teaching and care problems, or the role of preschools in combating or perpetuating social inequalities. In a popular understanding preschools are not associated with power operation (and as a result, surprise and disbelief was a common reaction to my topic). As far as Polish educational research is concerned, institutions of early childhood education and care have not yet been studied from the perspective of Foucault's analytics of power. My project, in which I attempted to demonstrate that the preschool is indeed a place where power works, may hopefully make a relevant contribution to the field of Foucaultian research in Poland.

The working of power in preschools produces specific effects, the most striking of which is the hierarchical generational order. Through a meticulous examination of everyday practice I have showed how teachers use various means to position themselves as dominant and construct children as subordinated, expected to comply with orders and follow regulations. Learning about this dimension of preschool life makes it possible to challenge the widespread perception of a preschool as a merely idyllic place where children spent their time playing joyfully. A preschool can be, and often is, such a place. However, it can also be a place where children experience great sorrow and distress. As adults, we probably do not to want to see children's sadness and suffering as it leaves us uncomfortable. I hope this work becomes a call to face these emotions and to reflect on the shape of a society that makes children's oppression possible.

Moreover, the preschool is emblematic of other environments where children and adults interact. The analysis that I carried out may hopefully enrich an understanding of child-adult relations in society at large and be a voice in the ongoing discussion regarding violence against children. However, a hierarchical order developed on the basis of age and position is not unique to child-adult relations. It can easily be recognized in higher-level educational institutions, including universities, as well as in other, non-academic, contexts.

My research can therefore offer insights to help understand the working of power to produce hierarchies in general.

What I learned in the preschools may be, on one level, unsurprising or even banal. The role of educational institutions in preparing children to function within an existing social order is well known and has been documented in numerous studies. In the Polish context, it seems widely recognized (and accepted) that hierarchical structures based on age and position are an integral element of that order. There is therefore nothing unexpected in the discovery that, as one of the girls in my research observed, "if you are bigger, you can do whatever you want to" and if "someone is in a kindergarten, they can't do what they want."

However, the extent to which children live in an adult-centric world, as demonstrated in my research, is surprising or even shocking. Children in my study – and there is no reason to think that their situation differs significantly from that of other Polish children – had very little influence on matters that concerned them, from attending preschool, to activities or meals, to the satisfaction of their basic physiological needs. In a particularly troubling manner, the very close observation of children's everyday lives revealed the scope of oppression, including physical violence, they experienced. While they did not phrase it as such, children clearly expressed their feelings of sadness and pain they suffered in relation to various forms of teachers' dominance.

My research therefore fully substantiates Mayall's (2002) thesis of the minority status of childhood. In her view, the minority status of childhood is confirmed, and constituted, by the fact that childhood is seen as a period of dependency and subordination and that adults shape the main sites of childhood, as well as by the belief that children need to be socialized. While all these aspects were present in the institutions I studied, it is important to emphasize again that preschool practices that construct children as a minority group do not necessarily speak to the work of individual teachers. Instead, they should be perceived in terms of the specific organization of a society, including its discursive and structural factors, that makes the blatant oppression of children and lack of attentiveness to their well-being possible. Among some of the crucial aspects are material conditions of preschool education, the social status of childcare and the construction of childhood.

Despite political declarations of support for early childhood education, it could be argued that preschools and, in consequence, children are neglected on a structural level. The fact that preschools are not financed by the central government is the clearest illustration of this neglect. Poorer municipalities or

those that do not prioritize preschool education do not provide adequate funding to ensure the proper functioning of preschools. In extreme cases they resort to closing or privatizing preschools, and data presented in Chapter 1 testifies to this. When public preschools are retained, they become increasingly responsible for financing themselves. In both preschools where I conducted my research money was a serious problem. All the teachers pointed to the lack of resources they needed in order to make their work with children smoother. Both principals talked a lot about the demanding and time-consuming work of fundraising they were forced to do: searching for potential sponsors or preparing grant applications. They both observed that they carried out that work at the cost of their involvement in activities directly related to the preschool's main function of providing quality care and education for children, such as identifying and solving problems, developing means of improving the quality of work or discussing and implementing new approaches. This is a paradoxical situation: on a discursive level preschool education and children have been at the center of attention in recent years. The reform aimed at lowering the statutory school age and ensuring broader access of younger children to preschools is now being implemented with the declared intention of improving educational opportunities and life chances of underprivileged children. On a symbolic plane, the school year 2008/2009 was announced as "Preschooler's Year." The everyday reality, however, is that of underfunded preschools that are unable to ensure free and unlimited access to drinking water or psychological assistance for children who need it. Such often dramatic aspects of everyday preschool functioning speak volumes for a child's marginalized social position.

The social perception of childcare is another factor that leads to the practical neglect of children and their underprivileged social position. A preschool teacher's work is commonly perceived as an extension of care work carried out at home mostly by women. Just as care work in private settings is devalued, so is the preschool teachers' – predominantly women – work. This is reflected in teachers' low salaries and the low prestige of their work. The economic disadvantage of preschools I discussed above could be related to the construction of childcare as fairly disrespected work that is done by women out of love and devotion rather than as a remunerated job. While the low social status of children could be a factor in the devaluation of childcare work, it could also possibly be argued that the opposite process takes place and the disrespect for childcare renders children as a marginalized and disrespected group. Moreover, at the level of preschool teachers' everyday

practice, the fact that teachers constantly face a dilemma cannot be dismissed. Care is at the core of a preschool teacher‘s work, and the teachers involved in my research pointed out that it is impossible to perform it without caring for children. At the same time, they knew that childcare work is disrespected. In order to maintain the sense of undertaking a valuable activity for which they could be respected, the teachers had to reconstruct the concept of their work. Therefore, emphasis was placed on the teaching aspect, including changing the name of the occupation. This shift toward education and away from care, however, conflicts with a basic understanding of a preschool teacher‘s job. Although the teachers in my research did not express it directly, this tension could be identified as an element constantly present in their work. To be respected, the teachers had to play down the very dimension of their job that they perceived as constituting it. It could be expected that living with such a tension would have an impact on their performance as teachers, especially when children resist their educational practices. Moreover, it could be argued that the emphasis on teaching/education as opposed to care may not be necessarily beneficial for children in terms of meeting their needs.

My research also revealed the strength of the discursive construction of the child as in need of direction, guidance and supervision. The teachers in my research were constrained by such a construction to a large extent, and their unwillingness to let children have a say in matters that concerned them directly testifies to this. Preschool A teachers in particular positioned themselves as organizers of children's lives and possessors of knowledge to be transmitted. Importantly, not only did such constructions of the child and the adult function as a discursive resource on which the teachers drew in their work, but they were also constantly reproduced in the course of everyday interactions. A question arises therefore as to whether a change of practices could bring about a change in the way children are constructed and, in a long run, treated in society. Regimes of truth and practices are inextricably linked, and my analysis demonstrated how different understandings of the child and teachers' behavior came into play in the two preschools. While concrete practices were usually prompted by specific constructions of the child, the example of Preschool B teachers who, in spite of their fears, decided to give children more space to act independently, demonstrates that beginning with a particular practice is also possible. The teachers, although still convinced that the children were in danger of hurting themselves and thus required supervision, allowed them to play on their own, which in turn helped to construct them as capable of planning their own activities and making

arrangements with other children[73]. Yet, the change of practices cannot occur unless teachers become aware of their own actions and their consequences. My research shows that the teachers, often constrained by specific regimes of truth, could not easily examine critically the ramifications of their practices. My hope is that my reading of the possible effects of preschool practices would facilitate such a reflection and practicing for liberty (Mac Naughton 2005).

My findings – however limited and partial – call some aspects of the present Polish model of preschool care into question. What emerges from my research is an image of a preschool as a place marked by stress, tension, time constraints and limited resources. A number of reasons for this could be identified. First is the strong emphasis on the educational character of a preschool, illustrated by the high proportion of academic activities in the core curriculum and a large number of extracurricular activities. Preschool children are expected to learn more and more. This results from the increasing requirements placed on preschools by educational authorities and from some parents' willingness to invest in children, to which preschools readily respond by offering additional activities. The idea that children need to be provided with a wide range of opportunities to learn and acquire skills from as early an age as possible so that they can succeed later is certainly more and more present among the more affluent sectors of Polish society and has a clear impact on the public education system.

Another factor that can account for the tension-marked character of the preschools I studied is the incongruence between the expectations and requirements of educational authorities and the preschool's everyday needs and routines. Here, pressure on preschools to "show off," to participate in inter-preschool events and to prove that "something is happening" in the institution, is particularly significant. This could be interpreted as a purely bureaucratic requirement stemming from the financing authorities' willingness to publicly demonstrate that preschools work well and to improve their performance by forcing them to compete with each other. However, if

73 Obviously, this point has to be qualified. Even if the teachers' decision not to forbid children to do everything was not linked to their understanding of the child, it was probably prompted by their conception of proper pedagogical practice. The close interconnection between discourse and practice renders specifying the exact logical order impossible. Perhaps action research, in which teachers could experience working in different ways, could be a fruitful research approach to learn about the possibility of introducing changes in preschool education.

anything, such solutions have the opposite effect on the quality of work in preschools. As I demonstrated in Chapter 10, the need to participate in external events placed additional pressure on the teachers and further limited their already insufficient time resources. It also had a direct impact on children who had to spend their free play time rehearsing for events.

These two elements, the pressure on the preschools to include a plethora of educational activities and to be active participants of life outside the preschool, had a detrimental impact on the everyday reality of the preschool. Possibly, the recent reform to lower the statutory school age and transfer most educational activities from preschool to school may have a positive impact on the functioning of preschools as it can take some tension away from the teachers and allow them to work under less stress due to time constraints. The changes are certainly worth observing.

## Further challenges

In this section I want to reflect on some limitations of my study. My research design prevented me from answering certain questions that arose in the course of my project. I perceive them as potential openings or points of departure for further investigation.

I managed to identify some rather significant differences between practices typical of the two preschools that rendered children's preschool experiences more or less enjoyable. The challenge now is to find out what caused these differences. Based on my research, I can tentatively point to a number of different types of factors: the material condition of the preschool; the socioeconomic and cultural background of children attending it; teachers' physical and emotional state, their skills and experience, and support they received; and a preschool's dominant discourses: on proper pedagogical practice, on a preschool child and teacher, and on their relationships. Possibly, the differences between the practices employed in each of the institutions I studied could be partly related to the distinct class locations of the preschools. My research does not allow me, however, to draw any definite conclusions concerning the impact of class (e.g. children's and teachers' class backgrounds) on preschool practices. For this, a larger-scale comparative study would be needed that would also involve a more systematic class analysis than I was able to perform. It could build on and complement already existing research on the role of educational institutions in perpetuating social inequalities. Combining

dominating (although not in the field of preschool studies) quantitative research with ethnographic approaches could yield particularly illuminating insights.

Investigating further structural factors and everyday practices that differentiate between preschools is now more urgent as preschool is becoming an important part of the daily life of an ever higher number of children who also spend an increasing amount of time there. In this context it is critical to become more conscious of the effects of practices followed in preschools, both on children's specific experiences of the place, and, on a more general plane, on the construction of the child and children's opportunities. Such investigations should include a close observation of everyday life, rather than relying on interviews or the analysis of documents and statistical data – as my research revealed, there can be serious discrepancies between declared practices and objectives, and daily practice.

Another issue that should be developed further is the systemic context of violence. I only hinted at a possible link between violence against children and systemic violence related to the social and political changes in the country. A question can be posed as to the extent to which violence perpetrated by adults (not only preschool teachers) is related to their experiences of the political changes in the country and the sudden transition to neoliberal capitalism, focused on profit-making and ignoring social costs of the change (UNICEF 1999). Social costs of the transition processes, such as unemployment, insecurity or distress, were much more pronounced in the neighborhood where Preschool A was located than in Preschool B area. At the same time, Preschool A was the place where different forms of violence were more widespread. While this could be interpreted as speaking to the existence of links between social and economic insecurity and violence, more systematic and complex research would be needed to substantiate this thesis.

Teachers occupy a fairly ambiguous place in my research. On the one hand, they were at the center of my attention – my focus on child-adult relations made it inevitable. Yet, I was concerned much more with the effects of teachers' practices on children than with the teachers' perception of these practices. I did not investigate their motivation for acting in a specific way in depth and, as a result, in many cases I did not know the pedagogical rationale behind their decisions. It could be rightly claimed that the teachers' experience of their work in a preschool was insufficiently examined. It would certainly be worth concentrating on their perception of the preschool in more detail, and

the knowledge produced in this way would be of great importance for identifying how the organization of preschools should/could be changed.

Moreover, in consequence of my decision to observe one group in a preschool, my study concentrates on specific teachers. The work that preschool teachers do is highly individualized. Teachers work with their group on their own, and situations in which they would be substituted with another teacher or would take care of another group are infrequent and exceptional. There is little collective, staff work. As a result, it is difficult to say to what extent what teachers do is related to the fact that they are specific people, with distinct temperaments, value systems, knowledge, experience or sensitivity, or to the fact that they work in a particular preschool environment, with its own institutionalized ways of doing childcare. It is not impossible that I would have discovered something else had I carried out the research with different groups in the same institutions. A question arises then about the generalizability of my findings, not only to other preschools, but even to other groups in the preschools studied. On the one hand, my knowledge about other teachers' ways of acting and practices followed in other groups is very limited as it is based only on unsystematic observations during whole-preschool events or incidents when substitute teachers worked with the group I studied. On the other hand, however individualized the preschool teacher's work is, the teachers themselves are an integral part of the social reality. The practices they adapt have their origin beyond the individual teachers, and it could be expected that some of them are a product of a given institutions, developed by generations of teachers. Ms Agnieszka's comment on my article which provided a comparative analysis of practices in the two groups observed, substantiates such a claim. In her view, what happens in a preschool to a large extent depends on what the principal promotes or discourages. The fact that the preschools in my research developed their own curricula, schemes of work and objectives to be attained also makes it possible to assume that there existed broader frameworks that structured the teachers' behavior. Moreover, as Gore (1998: 232) notices, "the institution of schooling might produce its own 'regime of pedagogy'" and, in consequence, there is a continuity of practices across educational settings and over time. It could be expected that practices I observed in the two groups could be found in other Polish preschools as well as, perhaps in a somewhat altered form, in childcare institutions elsewhere.

Nonetheless, my analysis of institutionalized preschool practices, rather than practices of specific teachers, remains necessarily tentative and

conjectural. It appears advisable for future research of this kind to include more than one group in a given institution. This would enable drawing more legitimate conclusions about the functioning of the whole institution, which would in turn constitute a more informed basis for elaborating on the link between preschool practices and the socioeconomic backgrounds of children who attend it.

Another challenge that emerged was related to the complexity and ambiguity that conceptualizing children's rights involves. Condemning direct violence against children is one, rather straightforward, thing. But how does one interpret practices that are a response to the urge to respect children's rights such as the right to decide on matters that concern them or to direct their own learning and development? Such practices seem to inevitably lead to constructing a child as a self-responsible and self-governing subject. Seen from the perspective of Foucault's theory of power, rather than freeing children from adults' surveillance and rule, such practices work to internalize control, turning children into self-managing individuals – importantly, often managing themselves according to what is required from them and without realizing it. The control moves from the level of the body to the soul, to put it in Foucault's vocabulary, and gets even more efficient, not least because it becomes invisible.

Gore (1998) closes her analysis of power relations in diverse educational settings with a quotation from one of Foucault's works that seems a good response to my doubts as well:

> To say that there cannot be a society without power relations in not to say either that those which are established are necessary, or, in any case, that power constitutes a fatality at the heart of societies, such that it cannot be undermined.
>
> (Foucault 1982: 223)

Preschools, like any other social spaces, are permeated with relations of power. However, as Gore (1998: 248) emphasizes, rather than trying to do away with them, which is an entirely futile task, we should make an effort to understand how power operates in a given setting, how it influences educators' practices and what effects it eventually produces. The task therefore is "to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed" (Foucault 1988: 155, quoted in Moss *et al.* 2000: 236). Gore (1998) maintains that this kind of critical reflection may enable the identification and removal of the most harmful practices. A shift to practices that entail increasing self-control and

self-governing would require the same attentiveness and reflexivity as any other practices.

There is also a more practical, concrete response. Dahlberg and Moss (2005: 107-110), while discussing the use of pedagogical documentation in Reggio Emilia, point to the danger of its turning into a device for governing the child. Pedagogical documentation consists in producing material that makes it possible to record practices taking place in a preschool, and in a critical, democratic, open discussion about that material. Dahlberg and Moss argue that in the Reggio Emilia approach, pedagogical documentation, rather than being a means of perfect surveillance and normalization of the child, serves to resist power. Critically used, it enables reflection on the practices employed and interpretations and meanings constructed, and can help challenge "truths" about children. In their view, practices that may potentially lead to an increased control and governing going deep down to the child's "soul," may produce subversive results – if approached critically and reflexively:

> The point of departure here is that the greater our awareness of our pedagogical practices, the greater our possibility to change through constructing a new space, where an alternative discourse or counter-discourse can be established producing new practices.
>
> (Dahlberg et al. 1999: 153)

Finally, a question remains as to what should/could be done with the knowledge produced in the course of this research project. In the United Kingdom context, Alderson and Morrow (2004) observe that although children's participation in research increases and their views are sought and collected, research with them still makes little impact. Children's views become known, but they are not acted on. Working on my project, including writing this thesis, I cherished the hope that it would make a difference. Not being a large-scale, representative research study, it could be dismissed as not applicable to other Polish preschools, partial and inconclusive. Yet, it could still be argued that some of the practices in play in the preschools reflect broader societal tendencies and can be found in other educational settings. My hope is that revealing the extent to which children function as a minority group – constituted as fully dependent on adults, deprived of the right to make decisions in (or even express their views on) matters that concern them, who can be humiliated (also as a result of concrete political decisions) – may encourage reflection on the fundamental values on which child-adult relationships are based. Perhaps one day Polish children will not have to

dream about going to a nice preschool where nobody shouts at them, teachers are very nice and everything is great, and the place where they spend so much time will be one they enjoy going to and which they truly feel a part of.

# Summary

This dissertation, situated in the framework of the new sociology of childhood and drawing on Michel Foucault's analytics of power, deals with the ways in which power operates to construct the ideals of a preschool child, a teacher and preschool practice in two Polish childcare institutions in a large city. It argues that in their daily practice, preschools work to reconstruct a hierarchical generational order in which adults are positioned as dominant and children are expected to subordinate. They play therefore a crucial role in constructing children as a minority status group (B. Mayall). The generational order, however, is flexible and undergoes modifications along with changes in the discourses about children, child-adult relations and the role of educational institutions. Moreover, the generational order is constantly reestablished in a preschool daily practice, as children and adults strive to position themselves in specific ways and children challenge their teachers' dominance.

Chapter 1 outlines the research context by providing information on the situation of children and childcare services in Poland. The impact of the systemic transition of 1989 on children is discussed, with focus on conditions of life, access to preschool provision and widespread and commonly accepted violence against children. Further, the chapter discusses the present-day functioning of preschools, in particular organization of preschool education and the position of teachers. It closes with a characteristic of the preschools studied. The overall aim of this chapter is to identify systemic and discursive factors that influence everyday work of preschools, and in particular preschool teachers' actions.

Chapter 2 presents the conceptual framework of the research project. It discusses its theoretical inspirations, methodological approach and the methods used. Particular attention is paid to the issue of carrying out research with children and from multiple perspectives, and the notion of a child's perspective is elaborated.

Chapter 3 opens the analytical part of the dissertation by providing a case study of a preschool boy considered a "misfit." As a child who violates rules, questions regulations that organize preschool life, and effectively undermines the existing order, he functions as the "pathological" against who the ideal of the "normal" preschool child is developed.

The construction of a such a "normal," proper preschooler is examined in Chapter 4. On the level of official documents, both preschools construct a

model of a child who is independent and resourceful, and whose needs and interests constitute the primary guideline for a teacher's work. In the teachers' discourse these models begin to differ. Teachers working in a predominantly working-class preschool construct their preschoolers as unruly, unpredictable, unreliable and almost dangerous, and therefore in need of control, correction and training from adults. The model of a preschooler established in the discourse of a more middle-class preschool teachers emphasizes a child's creativity and in-born potential that can flourish unless hampered by adults. The ideals of a child constructed in daily practice are still different. Obedience, subordination and the ability to abide by regulations, as well as to reflect on one's own behavior and control it, are normalized as features of a model preschooler in both institutions. The middle-class preschool, however, puts the emphasis on the role these abilities play in turning children into good group members, and constructs the model preschooler as emphatic and responsible for others' well-being, a moral subject capable of controlling their own behavior in order to avoid hurting others. The construction of the preschooler has its gender dimension, with gender differentiation clearly emphasized and girls pushed to the background.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 are all concerned with different dimensions of child-teacher relations. Chapter 5, drawing on the notions of positioning and generationing, examines different subject positions that teachers take and their implications for the construction of a child. Among the primary positions are a teacher as distinct from children, as a special adult (different from a parent), as a caretaker and as an educator. While these positions are diverse, they are all embedded in a hierarchical generational order. Ongoing changes in the generational order render some positions more problematic than others. As a result, practices of positioning oneself entail an increasing degree of tension and uncertainty for the teachers.

Chapter 6 and 7 deal with the ways in which the generational order and the model preschooler are established. Chapter 6 examines techniques of disciplinary power that are used to construct an obedient, constrained and self-controlled preschooler, such as distribution, surveillance, assessment, comparison, ranking, and a number of means aimed at producing children's "docile" bodies. While all these techniques are in a common use in both institutions, the more working-class preschool additionally employs a wide range of coercive methods through which to construct children as subordinate. Chapter 7 focuses on the processes of structuring everyday preschool life as a means of developing the generational order. It

demonstrates how teachers organized children's lives through development of regulations and control over time, activities and space. These practices took a slightly different form in each preschool, with the more middle-class preschool granting the children more decision-making power than the working-class one. The overriding argument in both chapters is that through the use of disciplinary technologies and control over preschool reality, teachers work to establish a generational order in which they occupy dominant positions, while children are constituted as a minority status group. Children from a more middle-class preschool, however, are constructed as more autonomous and independent than those from a working-class preschool.

Chapter 8 concentrates on children's responses to adults' dominance. Two major types of responses are examined. First, in line with the recognition that resistance is an integral dimension of relations of power and children refuse to submit to adults, preschoolers' resistance techniques are discussed. Second, ways in which children reenact the hierarchical order in their own peer groups are explored to show how dominance-subordination structures based on age, gender and preschool membership develop.

Chapter 9 examines children's views on their lives in the preschool: what they liked and disliked about it, and what they would like to see changed. Predictably, they protest against their marginalized position and devise their ideals of a preschools where their views would be more prevalent and where they would have more decision-making power. The chapter also includes a discussion of the ambiguities of the notion of responding to children's needs and of the notions of preschools as children's spaces vs. children' services.

The final Chapter 10 looks in more detail at the structural and discursive context of the preschool teacher's work. It provides the teachers' perspective on the functioning of the preschool and on their own work, including the primary difficulties they had to face. It argues that changes in the organization of preschools (related in part to their gradual inclusion in the market economy), as well as changes in the generational order, the conception of the child, and the role of the teachers, posed additional challenges the teachers had to respond to.

Although the dissertation is based on empirical material gathered during the course of extensive ethnographic research in just two preschools, it points to processes and phenomena of a greater relevance. Most importantly, it unearths the extent to which children live in an adult-centric world where they have little influence on matters that concern them. It argues that in spite of the claims of the significance of children in Polish society, the well-being of

actual, living children is largely disregarded. By exposing the marginalized position of children, this work aspires to help challenge widely held beliefs about children's social standing and contribute to a discussion that could lead to improving their situation.

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